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**Defining and developing an approach  
to employability in higher education: a  
study of sports degree provision**

D. Cole

PhD

2019

# **Defining and developing an approach to employability in higher education: a study of sports degree provision**

Doug Cole

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of the requirements of the

University of Northumbria at Newcastle

for the degree of

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Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences

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# Abstract

Employability in higher education has never been as critical an issue as at the present time, with governments across the world looking to universities to respond to the social, economic and employment-related challenges that exist. Employability is commonly articulated as a set of skills-based challenges, and universities are investing significantly in approaches to support students through into initial graduate employment.

In the UK, success is measured through graduate employment measures. This thesis, drawing upon the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2008), Kumar (2007), Tomlinson (2017a), and Knight and Yorke (2004) depart from the view that employability requires just a skills-based approach for employment, and instead articulate that what is required is a more holistic and integrated approach to employability and learning. Focusing upon employability in undergraduate sports programmes, this thesis argues that current thinking and practice demonstrate a limited understanding of employability, and that these views only limit future potential and results.

The aims of the study were first, to establish the current understanding of employability at a strategic and practice level within sports-related degree programmes in higher education, drawing from findings from available research literature on employability. The second aim was to produce a framework or model that would support a more effective way of addressing employability in the future.

The research was conducted using a mixed methodology, including two case studies and largely qualitative methods. The first stage consisted of a literature review, followed by a national survey of seventy-one institutions, which yielded usable responses from 69 academics representing 36 institutions. The themes identified from both these activities were then explored in the second research stage, with two selected institutional case studies. Participants in the case studies included eight university leaders, 25 academics and 22 students. Collectively, they participated in 22 individual interviews and eight focus groups.

The findings of this thesis are that employability is narrowly understood across each of the participant groups and is most often described as being a skills-based challenge, primarily for the purpose of students gaining initial employment. In addition, the thesis highlights how employability is often perceived as a disconnected area of work, discrete from the core business of learning, teaching and research. Moreover, the views of participants are typically not informed by the available employability-related research that has previously defined this complex and elusive concept. This existing published research has had no impact at either a strategic or practice level.

Given the apparent general lack of understanding and appreciation of exactly what contextual areas of learning are important to support employability, the research findings suggest that higher education will be limited in its ability to address this agenda more effectively in the future. Developed out of this research, the 'Dimensions for Learning' taxonomy presents a potential solution by seeking to disrupt the common and overly narrow understanding and discourse on employability.

It is argued that engagement with this taxonomy presents an opportunity to refocus thinking and actions to become learning-centred, research-aligned, integrated and more holistic. Critically, highlighting the need to focus learning beyond subject knowledge and skill development, the thesis highlights the importance of approaching employability from an interpersonal and intrapersonal perspective, in order to better support graduate success in both the workplace and life more broadly.

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Peter is the one person who has been instrumental in evolving my thinking at a conceptual and academic level around employability, through his insight and his expertise in learning and teaching, and the questions and discussions that have resulted over the years – all of which have been fundamental in contributing to my overall professional identity and the future trajectory of my career. For all of this I am eternally thankful and grateful.

Second, my heartfelt thanks go to my second supervisor, Dr Fiona McCormack, with whom I first embarked on this journey. Again, her patience and support were essential in ensuring I was able to continue this study in those early years. Her emotional support and knowledge from having worked with me for a number of years as a colleague was instrumental in me staying on track, being persistent and not giving up. For all of this I am immensely grateful.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents Peter Cole and Maureen Cole and my late grandfather Edward Lynch.

# Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by Buckinghamshire New University Ethics Committee on 23/7/13 (shown in Appendix A), and Northumbria University Ethics committee on 2/3/15 (shown in Appendix B).

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 91,081

Name: Doug Cole

Signature:

Date: 6 July 2020

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Why does this research matter?

The place of *employability* as a concept in higher education has been the subject of discussion for decades (Gazier, 1998, Philpott, 1999, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, Tomlinson, 2017a, Cole and Hallett, 2019). Such discussion has extended across multiple levels and stakeholders, including students, academics, leaders, employers and the British Government (Yorke, 2006), which specifically views employability as being primarily concerned with employment, and has long held an interest in the connection between higher education (HE) and the national economy (BIS, 2016). This interest was highlighted in the government commissioned report by Dearing (1997) and has continued since then, with employability being commonly articulated as a need to address the *job-related skills* that individuals should develop.

This focus on skills is further evidenced twenty years later in the Industrial Strategy (2017): “We will help people develop the skills needed for jobs of the future” Department for Energy, Business and Industrial Strategy [BEIS], (2017:94). This more recent example, follows a series of prominent policy documents, including the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006); Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK: Key Findings and Implications for Action (Spilsbury, Giles and Campbell, 2010); the Browne Report (2010) Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education; Students at the Heart of the System (Business, Industry and Skills [BIS], 2011); the Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration (2012); Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (BIS, 2016); and the Industrial Strategy (Department for Energy, Business and Industrial Strategy [BEIS], 2017), all of which carry an overt and explicit focus on skills development. The relationship between the concept of employability and the specificity of the skills agenda in HE is one of the main focus areas of this thesis.

Evidence of the relevance of these topics continuing to this day may be observed with the recently formed Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 and the current prominence of the *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework* (TEF) (Department for Education, 2017). Both were born from the desire of government to demonstrate value for money for students, whilst ensuring that graduate employment prospects remained at the forefront of institutions' thinking. The overall argument presented in this thesis is that this dominant narrative, which guides policy and practice, is not aligned to the thinking demonstrated in published employability studies, resulting in gaps in the learning opportunities that are provided or at least explicitly signposted for students today.

At the top of the higher education metric hierarchy within the TEF are the employment prospects of graduates, as articulated in what was, until recently, the *Destination of Leavers in Higher Education* survey (DLHE) (Department for Education, 2017). This national survey was previously conducted six months post-graduation. With the new *Graduate Outcomes* survey, the data collection point has moved to fifteen months post-graduation. This measure of the number of leavers from HE in graduate level roles is then translated into national league tables, published in the media, and is ultimately perceived to influence both institutional reputation and student numbers.

More recently the Augar Review (2019) of post-18 education and funding in England, adopted a view of both the further and higher education landscape, with a focus on value for money for students, widening access and ensuring that HE supports the skills and wider economic needs of the country (McVitty, 2019). With a firm commitment to the skills agenda and lifelong learning, this review signals the government's ongoing interest in this space, with attempts to focus on an area of learning perceived to be of most value to employability in both further and higher education. McVitty (2019) goes on to highlight how the intentions behind this review originated from a desire to address the perceived 'low-value' higher education programmes, which were accused of failing to deliver, in relation to both student aspirations and any return on the taxpayer's investment.

Combined, TEF and the recommendations from the Augar Review are contributing to a significant period of change across HE, and this looks destined to continue over the coming years. Change in HE is certainly inevitable, and one consistent factor in recent



years is this strong focus on student outcomes, particularly the government-defined view of what *success* in this regard should be. Good honours degrees and employment rates dominate this view. Graduates possessing a set of skills that neatly match and align with industry needs (Dearing 1997, Leitch 2006, Taylor 2017) – and therefore how many graduates secure first destination roles at a specific level - is seen as a yardstick for success by government and, in part, the solution to the economic challenges currently faced in the UK.

The assertion of this thesis is that a skills-based approach to workforce development at a national level is too linear and overly simplistic, a view which is supported, for example, in Cole and Hallett (2019) and Higdon (2016). This approach at the highest level is crucially important. Any assumptions made around the desired outcomes, as articulated via a skills-based lexicon, fail to account for other qualities and dispositions that are equally important, such as attitude and behaviours. Taking a purely skills-based approach demonstrates a lack of understanding of the broader underpinning variables involved in supporting workforce development and employability.

Nationally, skills remain the focus in relation to workforce development in both policy documents and the daily discourse of government, media and many in HE. With this narrow interpretation so entrenched, there is an urgent need to reflect on the accuracy of this narrative, highlighting the value of this doctoral research. With significant financial investment in HE, there is a risk that both financial resources and policy are directing attention to areas that, in isolation, are not sufficient to realise the UK's future workforce and economic ambitions.

In the case of undergraduate sports programmes, on which this thesis is based, developing graduates who are capable of engaging diverse communities in participation in sport is a complex challenge, and one which requires a plethora of personal qualities and dispositions that extend well beyond any simplistic notion of skills (Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Higdon, 2016, Holmes, 2001). This was of particular relevance in the lead-up to the 2012 London Olympic Games, when there was a clear desire to develop a world-leading community sports development system, capable of engaging greater numbers of people to participate in sport and physical activity as part of the Games' legacy.

The author's experience as a former Senior Lecturer working on a number of undergraduate sports programmes, and as an external examiner and advisor to several other institutions sports departments, has provided insight into current approaches to employability within this subject area. Working as an academic within an institution has also provided experience in how strategy related to employability could be implemented in practice. These experiences as an academic directly involved with curriculum design highlighted employability as being an important consideration. However, little more detail or guidance was ever offered, centrally or at subject level, on how and what exactly addressing employability entailed, beyond the typical push to engage more students in work placements and experience, including gaining coaching badges and certifications and working with colleagues from the institution's own Careers Service. Overall, this has shown the concept of employability to be ambiguous and ill-defined. It is essential that undergraduate sports students should be aware that while such activities contribute to supporting their future employability, they do not constitute an entire solution to the employability challenge. Beyond the areas of activity listed above, there has been an absence of detail on what additional areas of learning are also important to support students' future success. With no further direction provided centrally at a strategic level, it is often left to individual academics to engage further, or not, in support of the employability agenda. Ultimately, such engagement is largely dependent on their own personal viewpoints and position, on the value and place of employability in HE, and on their own programmes. This overall lack of clarity was a major factor in the motivation for this study and provides the context for this thesis, specifically in relation to undergraduate sports programmes and employability.

The recent national interest in employability has been amplified through the media's involvement in publishing metrics and rankings, with several national newspapers and websites now producing high-profile league tables across a number of different areas relating to the wider student experience, and which include the employment of university graduates. The original intention of government in requiring the collection of this data was to ensure that potential students and their families had access to information that the government perceived to be of value when deciding which institution would be best suited to a future student's needs and aspirations. How widely these figures are actually used, and their level of influence in the decision-making

process, is not known, but anecdotally it is clear that not all students look at these league tables when making the decision on what and where to study.

The focus on metrics here matters, because they are perceived to influence strategy and decision-making across all programme areas, including undergraduate sports programmes. Therefore, despite limitations, it is important to consider the potential power and influence that graduate employment data can have.

Perceived by some to be directly linked to institutional reputation, most UK higher education institutions (HEI) have their own Careers Service, tasked with taking responsibility for leading performance in employment metrics, often with a sponsor at the highest level of the university's executive team. The measures that started life simply as a tool for Careers Services to use to assess their own performance have since become metrics for which all staff in an institution are now held accountable. This is far from universally accepted by all academics (Fearn, 2008), and a great deal of tension exists around the place of these metrics and what is perceived to be *employability* in HE more widely.

## **Employment and employability**

At the heart of this conceptual dilemma, it is evident that the distinction between *employment* and *employability* has become blurred in terms of stakeholder understanding and the resulting discourse. With the ongoing focus on TEF, and with the OfS now placed to hold institutions to account, the pressure to respond to the employability agenda looks set to continue long-term, making it a strategic priority for HE institutions. The use of what is essentially a metric in employment rates as a proxy measure for *employability* is as a key limiting factor on how *employability* is ultimately best addressed at both a strategic and a practice level. Grealy and Laurie (2019) support this view, stating that the development of proxy indicators is more beneficial from a governance perspective than for enhancing practice for the benefit of individuals, suggesting a misalignment in the purpose and real value of these measures.

Clear understanding and associated discourse is a critical consideration in seeking to address the employability agenda more effectively in the future, and in challenging the

current articulation of the employability agenda in government policy and the resulting narrative. This thesis uses undergraduate sports programmes to illuminate current challenges, with a view to proposing a more positive and developmental position and discourse for the future. It examines the current understanding, interpretations and discourse associated with graduate employability according to selected university leaders, academics and students, and reflects on how these views relate to the conceptual models of employability defined in the literature. This thesis then presents a new framework based on these findings that can support more effective future approaches to employability through undergraduate sports programmes, and potentially beyond.

Despite the UK government's focus on employability at policy level, which has clearly been present for several years, questions on the effectiveness of this policy still exist. There are still those in industry who are critical of the standard of graduates, including graduates from undergraduate sports degree programmes in the UK (Minten, 2010 and Pitchford cited in Collins, 2010). In light of this criticism, the factors that currently impact on the design and content of undergraduate sports degree programmes become highly relevant. The *attributes* and *skills* that a graduate is expected to be able to demonstrate are stressed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), through subject benchmark statements for HE. In relation to sport, these were most recently revised in 2018, and the need to address employability is made clear within these statements and earlier versions. Institutions are being tasked to commit to a pedagogical approach to the development of what the QAA calls *employability skills*, aligning with the government skills-focused view and approach. If these aspirations to better support employability are not developed and designed effectively and with the right content, what will be the long-term legacy be, in terms of employment and – ultimately – professional standards, for the tens of thousands of students who graduate with sports degrees each year and go on to work in the sport and leisure industry? How institutions and academics respond to the focus on employability in terms of curriculum design is key. Their understanding and interpretation of employability is critical, and the resulting discourse with students and other key stakeholders will set the direction of travel and determine which areas of learning are deemed to be most appropriate. Critically, focusing on skills-based areas of learning in relation to the conceptual models of employability is inadequate, and highlights the relevance and importance of this study.

In terms of the national landscape for sport during this period, Sport England is the lead agency for the development of community sport, funded directly by government. At the time of embarking on this research, Sport England stated in its Strategy (2008-2011) that the national ambition was to create a leading sports development system that was recognised internationally. In 2018, Sport England went on to highlight its focus on workforce development, charging the *Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity* (CIMSPA), with leading this work, and continuing from the now defunct *Skills Active*, which was previously the associated sector skills council. The primary question now is whether or not the HE programmes currently available in the sector are producing graduates of the right quality, capable of delivering on these long-term national aspirations.

As already mentioned, at the time of starting this research, the 2012 London Olympics was fast approaching. With the national goal to develop a leading sports development system that would have a significant impact on community participation rates in sport and physical activity, there was no greater time in terms of investment in career opportunities for sports degree graduates. This was an opportunity to leave a legacy for sport. Those tasked with designing and delivering undergraduate sports programmes needed to take some responsibility and contribute towards achieving this goal and be confident in their ability to develop graduates who were flexible, capable and possessing the necessary qualities and dispositions to become effective practitioners in the community.

During the same period, *Skills Active* took the lead in developing professional standards and how to address specific sector skills needs for sport. Skills Active online (2008) stated: “Skills Active aims to professionalise and upskill the sector in the run-up to, and beyond, the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.”. The work that followed in establishing national occupational standards to serve as benchmarks for competence in the sports industry, combined with the work of the QAA in setting benchmarks for subject areas in higher education, is considered within this thesis.

With the Olympic legacy promising increased participation rates in sport and physical activity post-2012, and the subsequent failure of this promise (Gibson 2015, *Guardian Online*), something has clearly gone wrong. While not a simple challenge to address,

it is proposed here that the general standards of the workforce in relation to the areas identified within the employability literature over the last ten years is certainly a key variable in this failure to deliver on the legacy ambitions. In this respect, HEIs who are responsible for shaping the learning provision for those students entering these supporting professions certainly carry some responsibility.

## **Personal background**

My own career started in the sports industry, working in several management roles in the UK and in Asia over a fourteen-year period. I have now been working in HE for thirteen years, and during this time I have worked as a senior lecturer, teaching undergraduate sports students, before moving into institutional- level roles that have led to my involvement in the employability agenda at both a strategic and practice level. This has provided me with an in-depth insight into both aspects of this research: through first-hand experience of how institutions understand employability and then shape strategy to address it, and how academics understand and address employability in practice. These experiences position me closely to the research matter.

Since working in employability, I have written papers for WonkHE, British Universities and Colleges Sport, and the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity. In 2012, I developed the concept for a framework to embed employability more effectively into the curriculum at a national employability summit, hosted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Following this summit, the HEA commissioned me to write and develop the framework and supporting guide further with Maureen Tibby, and in 2013 it was published and launched nationally and internationally by the HEA. Since then, this work has had a global impact, and I have worked to explore how to embed the framework and the principles that underpin it at both a strategic and practice level across several institutions, here in the UK and overseas.

My work on employability has resulted in regular invitations to deliver keynotes at conferences for organisations such as the Westminster Forum, Inside Government and Understanding Modern Government. In addition, I am frequently invited to speak at other institutions here in the UK and overseas including visits to Australia, Dubai,

Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, China and Ireland. I have acted as an expert advisor to numerous organisations and individuals over the last ten years, for example the Open University, the University of Brighton, Leeds Beckett University, the University of Bedfordshire and a number of organisations in the US. Just recently, I co-authored my first book chapter which was published in Australia (Cole and Hallett, 2019). It was here that I first introduced the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy, work which I had independently developed as a direct result of the findings of this research, combined with the review of the literature included in this thesis (here noting the importance of the literature review as a research method in its own right).

I am passionate about further understanding practice in HE, focusing on sports programmes as the basis for this exploration, despite my career now becoming multi-disciplinary. As a student of employability and having been an advisor at strategic and practice level over the last ten years, I am committed to pushing the boundaries of this discipline and challenging the common assumptions that exist. I am particularly interested in the interplay between theory and practice, especially as there is little evidence of such research-informed practice occurring globally. This, alongside strategic approaches to employability, is another area notably omitted from the literature. My long-term aspiration is to influence how employability is addressed globally, and this thesis is a critical building block in achieving this ambition.

## **Research aims and objectives**

Taking into consideration the macro-level influences described, this research seeks to enhance the positioning of the employability agenda within institutions at both a strategic and practice level, and specifically in the context of undergraduate sports programmes. The aim of this thesis is therefore to:

1. Establish the current understanding of employability at a strategic and practice levels within sports-related degree programmes in higher education, and then comparing these findings to the supporting literature.
2. Produce a framework or model for addressing employability more effectively in the future.

To fulfil these aims, this thesis has adopted a mixed method, phased and largely qualitative methodology. The first phase involved a national survey conducted with academics teaching undergraduate sports programmes in the UK. The survey sought to establish their understanding and interpretations of employability within institutions at a practice level. By then adopting the Career Edge model of employability by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) as a reference and benchmark, it was then possible to identify and map this current understanding directly against a published conceptual model and identify both shared practice across institutions and potential gaps in provision within the sector.

Informed by the results of the national survey, two institutional case studies were then identified for more detailed investigation and follow-up, enabling key themes that had emerged to be explored. These themes are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The main sources for the case studies were selected institutional leaders, academics and students who were directly connected with the undergraduate sports programmes. The research methods adopted included semi-structured focus groups and interviews, all of which were recorded with informed consent and then transcribed. The case studies were also informed by a high-level documentation review, which included a preliminary overview of both institutions' strategies, their main websites and a small sample of their programme documentation.

In order to better understand the findings from each of these phases of activity, all transcribed results were manually coded. With my prior knowledge of the subject area, this facilitated a rigorous and thorough review, considering the findings alongside the supporting literature as a core feature of this work. This reflective and iterative approach allowed a range of areas to be explored as required.

### **Literature search strategy**

The search for supporting literature for this thesis was conducted between the years 2009 and 2019. It was initially focused on peer-reviewed, published journal articles, largely conducted using the Buckinghamshire New University online library from 2009 to 2012, and then the Northumbria University online library between 2016 and 2019. Using the Buckinghamshire New University and Northumbria Library Search allowed access to three selected databases: SportDiscus, EBSCO and Elsevier. These were



the primary journal databases utilised throughout the study. As a part-time student on campus irregularly, focusing the search via these portals presented the most practical solution and largely yielded the results that were required. In addition, Google Scholar was utilised to identify open access articles throughout the entire period of study, and Google search was used to locate other related books, reports and documents published by government departments or related articles in the media. Throughout this period, I learnt to be selective in my reading in response to the need to achieve interim deadlines. Initially, I had quickly become immersed in whole chapters and books, but I soon appreciated the need to adjust my approach. This led me to scanning materials in the first instance, enabling me to then focus on the content most closely related to my research topic, rather than being of wider interest.

The following primary search terms were used to locate articles, books, reports and documents specific to this study:

- *Employability*
- *Employability in higher education*
- *Employability and sport*
- *Employability and undergraduate sports programmes*
- *Employability and sports degrees*
- *Employability policy*
- *Employability strategy*
- *Models of employability*
- *Definitions of employability*
- *UK government and employability*
- *UK media and employability*
- *Employability skills*
- *Employability and pedagogy*
- *Employability and learning and teaching*
- *Purpose of higher education*

With the focus of this research being on employability and undergraduate sports programmes in the UK, clearly there was an interest in identifying papers written about policy and practice relating to these themes in the UK higher education sector.

However, due to the specific nature of these themes, it also became important to draw on a broader range of papers from other sectors around the world. For example, most of the research on emotional intelligence emanated from the US (e.g. Boyatzis, 1982, Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008, Goleman, 1996 and 1998, Mayer and Salovey, 1997). In addition, certain work was included from Australia, particularly where it had a focus on more strategic level approaches to employability (Bridgstock, 2009 and Scott, 2016b), which was an area highlighted as needing further research by Artess et al. (2017).

In summary, there has been limited work conducted specifically on employability and undergraduate sport programmes, with Collins (2010), Minten (2010) and Pitchford and Bacon (2005) being the only examples of authors who have written on the subject in any depth. Therefore, it became necessary to broaden the subsequent search terms used, creating several secondary search terms. These were:

- *Approaches to employability at the subject level*
- *Subject level employability*
- *Programme level employability*
- *Course level employability*
- *Discipline level employability*
- *Embedding employability at the course level*

These secondary searches yielded articles that related to other disciplines, such as Maguire and Hogan (2004) and Rivers and O'Brien (2019) on business-related programmes, and Zarb et al. (2019) on computing. With the focus of this thesis, however, being on employability and undergraduate sports programmes, it was important to limit the search under these broader terms, using them as illustrative examples (randomly selected) while concentrating time and efforts on directly related disciplines.

Within this thesis, the distinction is made between *employment* and *employability*, with a specific interest in unpacking the broader concept of employability and how it is related to individual understanding and the resulting discourse. The thesis is less concerned with exploring the theory and practice around *careers education* so it was decided to largely exclude articles and papers with more of a *careers* focus. There is

a parallel body of literature in the field of *careers education* and *career development*, however, for logistical reasons only a limited selection of papers have been cited, and these were selected on a case-by-case basis where the literature directly related to the specific topic under discussion.

Finally, reviewing the reference lists in identified articles and papers provided further titles that were then explored. This, with personal recommendations and access to other documents from my various employers during the 2009 to 2019 period, supported my literature search and selection during this study and formed a substantial part of the overall methodology.

### **Supporting literature**

There is a great variety of literature published around employability, and this can largely be split into two areas. First, there is a body of work that seeks to define this complex concept, including the publications of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Tomlinson (2017a) and Knight and Yorke (2004). Each of these authors has developed conceptual models that include defined qualities and dispositions which they argue are all critical to support a graduate's future success in an employment context. These are explored in Chapter 3.

Second, there is a body of work that describes how employability is addressed in practice. Such work is normally located within a specific subject discipline or within a single institution, for example Financial Services Skills Council (Cited in Kumar 2007), Maguire and Hogan (2004), Minten (2010), Rivers and O'Brien (2019), Zarb et al. (2019). In these studies, the disciplines of sport, finance, business and computing have all been explored in isolation. For example, Zarb et al. (2019) considered how to embed entrepreneurial skills specifically with computing students, whilst Rivers and O'Brien (2019) explored how to develop business-ready graduates and the associated pedagogies. This work typically emanates from the author's personal connection to the subject, often as an academic teaching in a specific subject area, which may then be presented as a case study of practice. There are limitations to this second body of work, as highlighted by Taylor and Hooley (2014:188) who state, "the empirical evidence that exists around the impact of employability initiatives is [currently] limited", suggesting that more work is needed in this space.

These two significant bodies of literature have continued to expand over the last decade, particularly where individuals working within specific disciplines have described the interventions, activities and programmes that they have designed to support their student's employability.

This thesis deliberately seeks to adopt an alternative approach, with the aim of establishing a more detailed view of the current understanding of employability and the resulting discourse, most importantly as this clearly influences subsequent practice in the classroom with students. This study aims to better understand the motivations for selecting particular practices and is positioned more closely to the first body of work, comparing how current understanding and interpretations of employability amongst the selected leaders, academics and students connected with undergraduate sports programmes, then fundamentally relates to the conceptual models published in the employability research.

At the start of this chapter, the close association between employability and skills was raised as being problematic. This association has been brought into question by previous studies some of which assert that skills-focused solutions fail to acknowledge the close alignment between employability and the wider questions of personal effectiveness and citizenship (Quendler and Lamb 2016; Schmidt and Bargel 2012). Offering further support to the need to challenge this overt focus on skills, Holmes (2001) cites the work of Bridges (1992), Barnett (1994), Holmes (1999, 2000) and Wolf (1991) with Higdon (2016) all adding to a considerable body of literature that has been critical of a skills-focused approach for some time, yet this dominant interpretation still prevails.

There have been isolated calls to understand and interpret employability more holistically, highlighting the importance of looking beyond employment rates and salary – currently in general use as measures of success – which act as convenient proxy measures for employability to this day (Bridgstock, 2009, Cole and Tibby, 2013, Tomlinson, 2017a).

Since beginning this research, there remains a gap in the literature relating to the praxis between these two bodies of work, and how understanding and interpretations

of employability then inform subsequent practice. This has to be the first consideration when seeking to design any future and effective approach to employability.

As far as I have been able to establish there is no research that includes or refers to individuals or institutions engaging with underpinning employability research, and none that relate to undergraduate sports programmes. This is where this thesis seeks to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge: considering current understanding of the conceptual models of employability, before presenting a taxonomy to support more effective future approaches to employability at subject level for undergraduate sports programmes, at an institutional level, and potentially more widely still.

Despite its high-profile nature, there are critics who dispute the place of the employability agenda in HE at all (Collini, 2012 and Fearn, 2008). Speight et al. (2013) examine how this debate manifests within HEIs and argue that many stakeholders perceive employability as a threat to disciplinary learning. This view was reflected by several participants within the academic research sample who teach undergraduate sports programmes.

Counter to this view, there is the consideration that students are investing their time and money in accessing HE with the expectation that it will offer them access to better career opportunities than if they had not attended. For the most part, this expectation is met, with graduates generally doing better in the labour market than non-graduates (Naylor, Smith and Telhaj 2015). This is further supported by Shury et al. (2017: 17) who states:

Career plans on starting university - Most of the graduates in the Planning for Success cohort chose to study at university either in order to improve their employability or in order to pursue a specific career. Fewer were inspired by academic interest.

Allowing multiple options to be selected, this study adds that 74% of students reported that their primary motivation for studying was to support securing a job, with only 58% cited academic interest or curiosity as their primary motivator (Shury et al., 2017). These findings were also in line with earlier work conducted by CBI and NUS (2011).

The current literature highlights how employability is a highly relevant area of study and, despite the growing body of research, that there are certainly misunderstandings and misconceptions about how it is interpreted as a concept, how it is subsequently translated into practice, and how to measure success.

In the previous sections, the importance of employability at the national level has been highlighted and the current views, understanding and the resulting discourse has been introduced. Examining this body of work at a macro level enables subsequent reflection of its overall effectiveness, particularly when compared to the body of literature on employability theory, and the conceptual models that have been in existence for over a decade. With little evidence of the influence of existing literature on both strategy and practice, it has been established that it is now essential to re-examine how employability is currently being addressed in HE, and to challenge the common and entrenched skills-focused approach as being too narrow and overly simplistic. In addition, the current use of employment rates as public measures of success only adds to the confusion between the terms *employment* and *employability*. This requires further reflection.

## **Thesis structure**

Chapters 2 and 3 are both literature review chapters. Chapter 2 considers the origins and place of employability in HE today. Chapter 3 then introduces and reflects on several conceptual models of employability that, in some cases, have existed for over a decade but which are rarely referenced, if at all. This area is explored in order to establish a basis for more effectively understanding the current interpretations of employability, how this may or may not relate to the research and, as a result, how both strategy and practice might be further enhanced in the future.

In Chapter 2 the significance of employability to the British Government is fully explored, and the resulting interpretation of employability being predominantly centred on skills, where success is measured by the numbers of graduates in professional or managerial level jobs six months after graduation (as articulated via the former DLHE survey, now the Graduate Outcomes Survey, conducted fifteen months post-graduation). These metrics are then discussed in depth, including their limitations and associated challenges. This exploration includes looking at the pressure that these

national metrics and associated league tables create, and how their use influences thinking and the understanding of employability amongst a range of stakeholders. With interpretations and reported actions lacking any research informed rationale, this employment focused approach may be described as a narrow and surface-level approach to employability, centred predominantly around students gaining a set of skills simply for the purpose of gaining a 'first destination' job. The influence of the conceptual models of employability is notably absent at this government level.

In Chapter 3, consideration is given to the body of literature on employability that has effectively been hidden for over a decade, largely ignored by stakeholders involved in the employability agenda, yet which includes several conceptual models and definitions. These include Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Kumar (2007), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a). These conceptual models have mostly remained exactly that for the main part, remaining disconnected at this conceptual level and have not been embedded into practice, at either a local or strategic level. The work of each of these authors focused on a rationale for defining employability, rather than being concerned with how each of their models might then be embedded in practice within an institution. Scott (2016b) was an exception here, and developed a conceptual model for employability, then embedded this in practice through his work, this is explored later in this thesis. However, most commonly, this translation from concept into action remains a gap in both practice and the literature to this day.

Chapter 4 details the methodology adopted in this research, describing the largely qualitative phased, mixed-methods approach that was adopted. This includes a national survey in phase one (see Appendix C), which then informed the design of a case study methodology in phase two. This second phase was conducted with two institutions to explore the survey findings, and these research sites are described at the end of Chapter 4. The case studies examine the findings of the national survey in greater depth with selected leaders, academics and students at these two universities. Semi- structured focus groups and interviews were the primary methods utilised in the case studies (see Appendix D), with certain key documents also reviewed as part of this research. Research findings are presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

In Chapter 5, the findings from the national survey and the leader sample from the case studies are shared. Chronologically, the national survey was conducted in phase one of the research and aimed at academics teaching on undergraduate sports programmes. The findings from this phase directly informed the design and questions included in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted in phase two (see Appendix D). Reflecting on the responses from leaders and academics, some immediate similarities were identified. These included the common theme that employability was understood and interpreted directly in relation to both the associated employment metrics and the supporting skills deemed necessary to enable graduates' successful transition into the world of work. The themes that emerged from the original survey were echoed by the case study participant groups, and this is reported in Chapters 5 and 6.

In addition, a limited sample of institutional level documentation was reviewed, to establish understanding of employability in this written form. Here, the dual focus emerged, where *employment* and *employability* had been used interchangeably, although on occasions distinctions were made between the two terms. Overall, however, this resulted in a scenario where a range of views existed, raising questions around the potential to achieve consistency and parity.

Chapter 6 outlines the findings from both the academic and student samples directly connected with the undergraduate sports programmes in the two case studies. Parallels could be drawn with the leader's sample in Chapter 5, reflecting several of the key themes that emerged – including the dominant focus on developing skills to support future employment, largely being reported to be achieved through placement and other direct experience beyond the curriculum. Recognition has been given to the fact that there were a limited number of individuals who held a slightly more nuanced view of the concept of employability in comparison to the models that have been published in the literature. Very few participants from any of the sample groups reported having read the conceptual models of employability in the literature. Instead, their interpretations of employability were informed directly by experience, other colleagues, personal experience and common sense. This showed a lack of connection with the conceptual models of employability and research that has existed for over a decade.



Chapter 7 explores each of the key findings in more depth, highlighting how they relate to the existing body of literature, and identifying gaps and the challenges that require further attention. These findings include a response to the research aims of the thesis outlined at the start of this chapter. They then go on to demonstrate that the notion of employability is interpreted in a variety of ways, and that these perceptions commonly centre around the notion of gaining skills specifically for the purpose of securing a first destination job. This was the most common interpretation shared by participants, and while there were individuals with more nuanced views, these were isolated voices amongst the louder and more dominant discourse observed across the samples.

Through the current interpretations captured in the findings of this thesis, this thinking and the resulting discourse has resulted in a disconnect, where employability is commonly viewed as being a discrete area of learning, often associated with the Careers and Employability Service and the typical learning activities that they are directly involved with, for example, curriculum vitae advice, interview preparation and placements. Employability was never explicitly spoken about in the sample as being primarily concerned with learning more holistically. There was at times an apparent sense of detachment, as several academics didn't view employability as their responsibility or didn't agree with it at all. Even where there was a sense of responsibility, there was still ambiguity and a lack of clarity about what employability was and how exactly this should be addressed more effectively in practice.

As a result of these findings and the supporting body of literature, I make the assertion that there is an urgent need to reposition and redefine the concept of employability, as being concerned with learning across multiple defined and connected contexts. These are the *Dimensions for Learning* in the new taxonomy presented in this thesis in response to the second research aim.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by summarising the study's key findings and assertions, presented as a direct response to the challenges identified, both through this research and in wider literature. Recommendations are made in terms of opportunities for future research, with concluding comments that highlight the importance of reframing employability as a concept that needs to be better understood by all stakeholders and supported through a more research informed view. This can then enable the resulting strategy and practice to be focused on more diverse areas

of learning, thus forming part of a more strategic and targeted approach to learning, teaching and pedagogy. This would effectively reposition the employability agenda as being primarily concerned with developing students more holistically, stretching beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills for a single job and incorporating a critical focus on the individual and the qualities, attitude and behaviours that will support them to be more effective in life, as well as from an employment perspective. This shifts the attention and resulting discourse into a more engaging and holistic frame of reference and the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy is presented as a means of achieving this important change.

## Chapter 2

# Higher education, policy and context

### Introduction

This chapter examines the place of employability in HE today. It reflects on the purpose of higher education and the current synergies and tensions created by an overt focus on the employability agenda.

The drivers behind this agenda, and their origins and purpose, are considered here, exploring the prominence of the skills agenda which has resulted as an explicit government-level response to the employment challenge and considering the role of the media as a significant influence on understanding of employability. Recent changes within the HE sector will be examined and the potential impact that they have had at both strategic and practice level.

The chapter then explores the relationship between the desired outcomes of the employability agenda and the objectives of good pedagogy and the broader learning and teaching agenda. This includes the recent focus on teaching excellence, led by the government and manifesting in the introduction of the *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework* (TEF).

Next, the influence of external metrics in driving policy and practice in HE will be critiqued. In response to resulting pressures, the relationship between employability, the curriculum and quality assurance will be discussed, as well as any resistance that may be created within the academic community.

The employer perspective is also considered briefly, exploring the desired skills, qualities and dispositions of new employees.

Finally, the praxis between employability theory and practice will be explored, giving consideration to the current foundations that exist, and the suitability of these footings for future development. In conclusion, initial observations will be offered on common themes identified from within the reviewed literature.

## Origins and the place of employability today

According to Gazier (1998) *employability*, as a concept relating to unemployment and labour markets, has been around for over one hundred years:

However, during the past decade the concept has commanded a central place in labour market policies in the European Union, the UK's New Deal and elsewhere at national, regional and local levels...

(McQuaid et al., 2005:191)

This prominent place on the government agenda continues to this day, as will be shown throughout the following chapters. Biggs and Tang (2011:198) go back further, highlighting even earlier references to the principles linking education and employment:

In the Chinese Han Dynasty, established in 206 BC, the purpose of education was selective. Students were required to master a huge classical curriculum, in order to put into effect Confucius's belief that 'those that excel in their study should become officials' (quoted in Zeng 1999:21).

From the outset, this highlights first, the relationship between education and industry, and second, the global relevance of the employability agenda, where it has become a shared challenge across HE sectors in numerous countries (Kalfa and Taksa 2015; Pavlin and Svetlik 2014). Govender and Taylor (2015) argue that the focus on employability continues to increase internationally, as individual governments seek to address their own employment challenges.

According to Clarke and Patrickson (2008:122) there are two main causes for such interest in employability:

1. The economic impact of skill and labour shortages (exacerbated by an aging workforce) and the need to address those issues at public policy level; and
2. The changing nature of careers and the erosion of job security

(Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Van der Heijden, 2002; Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2004)

These observations illustrate the perceived connection between employability and the economic health of a country, where its people are considered an asset. This relationship aligns closely with the thinking behind the *Human Capital Theory* from Becker (1975), which proposes that it is the role of government to enable factors to be established that allow and promote the growth of human capital in a country, in order that it may be competitive in a global economy.

This intertwined relationship results in a complex, high-stakes climate, with pressure to succeed on all the stakeholders involved. When issues are then voiced concerning the apparent drop in standards of the workforce (Knight and Yorke, 2004, Kogan, 1985 cited in Ramsden, 1992, Minten, 2010, Pitchford cited in Collins, 2010), this ultimately becomes a matter of national interest.

Therefore, there is a clear need for research that seeks to identify influencing factors on the effectiveness of current approaches to the employability agenda.

Yorke (2006) reinforces the national level of interest in employability, suggesting that governments around the world have, to different degrees, made it a responsibility of HE sectors. Here the expectations are clear, that HE has a responsibility to respond and contribute to supporting the strengthening of the future workforce.

Further evidence of the global prominence of the employability agenda, and the focus on HE and its outcomes, is provided by Scott (2016b:11) who states:

Assuring the quality of the outcomes of higher education and the achievements of our graduates has recently seen a resurgence of interest as governments world-wide focus increasingly on confirming that their massive investments in the sector over the past three decades.

This highlights not only the need for HEIs to respond in terms of supporting the country to be economically competitive, but also by ensuring that they demonstrate value for money, particularly in relation to government investment. The employability agenda is,

in effect, HE's response to these pressures. Evidence of the impact that government has had on HE in the UK, and the resulting employability focus, is offered here:

Within the UK, the focus on employability has also been highlighted by the introduction of higher student fees and the increasing marketisation of higher education (Blackmore et al., 2016; Pemberton et al., 2013; Wilton, 2014).

(cited in Blackmore et al., 2016: 19)

Universities now compete for potential students on a national basis, driven by reputation, league tables and a constant pressure to innovate. This has led to institutions offering students additional support to develop their future employability, in an attempt to positively influence both student and parental perceptions, and therefore enrolment numbers. The publication of league tables amplifies competition, making an institution's employability offer a strong marketing tool and potential differentiator in an increasingly crowded market.

Several years ago, the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) made the following statement on the place of employability in higher education:

Embedding employability into the core of higher education will continue to be a key priority of government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring both significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development.

(Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012 online)

This makes it very clear that employability is seen as a key consideration for all parties concerned, and that the benefits go beyond economic value, being perceived to impact on 'social and cultural development'. While this was written eight years ago during a period when change has been constant, evidence that employability remains a government priority may be observed through the emergence and subsequent prominence of the *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework* (TEF), an initiative driven and embedded by the current British Government. Originating from a requirement for HE to better demonstrate value for money for students, TEF was

intended as a policy to address the balance between research and teaching, in terms of focus and investment. This view was rooted in the viewpoint that teaching had become of secondary importance, which might be considered to be linked to the introduction of the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF). This research-focused framework is directly associated with funding allocations, which are a significant financial resource for institutions, and thus acts as a key driver for both university strategy and practice.

A number of other significant changes have occurred across the HE landscape in response to the government's intentions and TEF. In 2018, HEFCE and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), were effectively positioned together to form the Office for Students (OfS). With a clear mandate to represent the best interests of students, and an explicit focus on the wider student experience and value for money proposition, this has resulted in an intense spotlight on graduate outcomes. The OfS has made it clear that it will be taking an active role in seeking to influence the HE sector and its work on the employability agenda. Evidence of this can be found in the Industrial Strategy, (Department for Energy, Business and Industrial Strategy [BEIS], 2017:101) which states that the OfS will "support the wider economic needs of the country" and "increase the number of work-ready graduates". As highlighted in the previous chapter, Augar (2019), states the importance of education in supporting students to gain the skills required by industry and the wider economy too.

This is a clear indication of the increasingly strong hand that the government is adopting with universities, while paying close attention to HE activities intended to support students in improving their future employment outcomes. Graduates securing their first job, or at least a job within 15 months of graduating is now seen as the measure of success for universities, and this raises a number of significant challenges. The issue of individual understanding and interpretation of employability will be explored throughout this thesis, and to set the context, some initial observations are now offered.

Despite the use of the word *employability* at the highest level, it remains a contested term used in a range of contexts (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Supporting this notion, Philpott (1999) describe employability as a *buzzword* that is often used, but which is interpreted in different ways. Gazier (1998:298) (cited in McQuaid and Lindsay,

2005:197), states that employability is “a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all”. Although this observation dates back over 20 years, evidence would suggest that it is still relevant (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, Williams et al., 2015).

Despite the increasing focus and attention, the term employability has many meanings that vary greatly around the world (BIS, 2011; Huang et al., 2014). Commentators defining employability are quick to highlight that ‘employability’ cannot be reduced to employment, and instead encompasses the development of a “combination” or “set of achievements” of skills, knowledge, understanding, and personal attributes; that together make a graduate more likely to gain and remain in employment (EACEA, 2015; Harvey, 2003; Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009; Yorke, 2006).

(cited in Blackmore et al., 2016: 10)

The lack of clarity in this regard is crucial, as without a shared narrative, how can employers, academics, professional service staff and students be aware of what is important and what is not? Developing a shared narrative, in context, is absolutely fundamental to the employability agenda, and to date appears to have been largely ignored in practice. As an analogy, this would be like starting a journey without knowing your final destination, or the route to get there. In learning and teaching terms, this would be equivalent to teaching a module with no specified learning outcomes beyond ‘ensuring graduates secure jobs’. The reality is that this ambiguity can be observed in the varying institutional efforts to address employability that are being made around the world.

Supporting these statements, Tomlinson (2017a: 348) suggests:

There is, however, a need to think more broadly and conceptually about graduate employability and introduce new vocabularies that connect with its relational complexities and also graduates’ lived experiences through and beyond HE.

He expands on this further, stating:



..... while notions of graduate 'skills', 'competencies' and 'attributes' are used inter-changeably, they often convey different things to different people and definitions are not always likely to be shared among employers, university teachers and graduates themselves (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Barrie, 2006).

(cited in Tomlinson, 2017a: 412)

This perceived lack of clarity and consensus again, in the level of understanding and discourse around this agenda, is suggested to be one of the major challenges within this field of work and is therefore one of the core themes that is explored throughout this thesis.

Reflecting on its origins once more, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) describe employability in relation to labour market policy and highlight how employability previously became one of four key areas of work on an international level within the European Employment Strategy, following discussions on employment in Luxembourg in 1997. With a clear focus from governments on *employment*, rather than *employability*, this stance can be seen to have a dual focus at times, as demonstrated by the European Commission, which began to discuss this area of work in terms of developing *human capital* and ways to foster lifelong learning (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), once again demonstrating the importance of the relationship between education and industry.

Also highlighting this relationship, Australian-based Scott (2016b) published the results of his Office for Learning and Teaching, National Senior Teaching Fellowship, where he conducted a large-scale study with approximately 3,700 senior leaders from higher education, employers and other professional groups. The aim of his study was to seek to establish the desired capabilities and competencies for graduates, and from these findings propose ways to best support future employment. The model he developed is included below and summarises his findings. Scott then explored how to best approach embedding the elements of his model within relevant and appropriately designed assessments.

Scott's research centres on these two key stages: describing the specific learning outcomes deemed to be most desirable by the participants in his sample (and

therefore required by graduates), and then looking at how to translate these desired outcomes into practice with students by embedding them within assessment design.

The figure below depicts the model developed as a result of Scott's research.

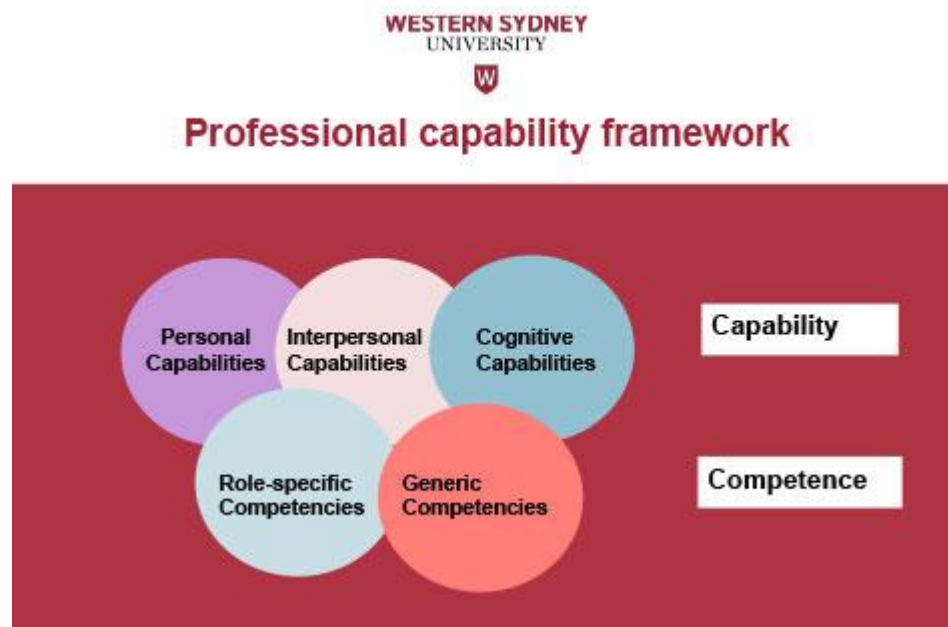


Figure 1: The professional capability framework, Scott (2016b: 8)

There are clearly merits within the work of Scott (2016b), including primarily how he seeks to challenge the dominant rhetoric of skills, shifting to a discourse of capabilities and competencies. However, in terms of translating this conceptualisation and framework to practice, it might be argued that there also may not always be a common understanding of the specific terms used. This is certainly supported in the previous citation from Tomlinson (2017), who questions the use of terms such as *competencies*, due to their ambiguity, which is the same as the problem of the over-use of the term *skills*, which is critiqued throughout this thesis.

By developing and presenting his framework in this way, Scott highlights the importance of areas of learning beyond knowledge alone, including *personal and interpersonal capabilities*, areas which are discussed in more depth in Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis, and which are key features in the findings of this study. There are also clear links to other literature, including Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) with *emotional intelligence* and Gardner (1999) with *interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence* and

then finally in relation to the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy presented as a result of this research.

### *The purpose of higher education*

Yorke (2006) discusses the relationship between higher education and the economy, quoting the Robbins Report published in 1963 as one of the earliest indications of this link. Within the report there were four main objectives, the first being concerned with the development of suitable skills for future employment. This stressed the importance of the relationship between industry and education and the direct impact this relationship could have on the development of the future workforce (Robbins, 1963).

The importance of graduate outcomes to the economy was also made clear by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), who produced a report called *Working towards your future – Making the most of your time in higher education* in 2011. This report was aimed at a student audience and highlighted the importance of skills in relation to employability. Here it was reported that four out of five students stated that seeking to improve their career opportunities was one of their main reasons for going to university, making this the most common reason cited amongst their total sample. This also highlights the increased pressure on universities to respond.

Over thirty years after the Robbins Report, the Dearing Report in 1997 went on to make the links between HE and the economy. Within this report, one of the key recommendations was for more provision in HE to include opportunities for students to develop *job-related skills*. Whilst highlighting a real potential need, this somewhat narrow terminology and use of the label *skills* is considered problematic. *Skills*, which will be discussed in the following chapter, are only a part of the broader *employability* concept.

Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011:3) also make it clear how government has adopted a particular lens through which to view the challenge of economic growth and supporting workforce development:

The official, government approach to graduate employability has been skills-led, from Dearing (1997) to Leitch (2006), despite the fact that this has been increasingly called into question. For example, a significant piece of research by Mason et al. (2003), summarised by Cranmer (2006), called into question the efficacy of skills provision in higher education.

The major challenge this highlights is that use of the term *skills* has a long history and has become a consistent focal point within the discourse, its use now habitual amongst the majority. Evidence of how deep-rooted this narrative is, was illustrated once again by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) who highlighted how in 1997 the British Government defined employability as primarily being concerned with the individual developing the skills to gain employment, and then continue to be employed throughout their career.

More recently, the Taylor Report (2017) on *Modern Working Practices*, commissioned by government, highlights that it is important that education prepares young people for an uncertain future – one in which roles will exist that simply do not exist today. Here, Taylor makes an important assertion: that *employability* is not simply concerned with securing that first job but is also concerned with continuing to be employed. Whilst clearly progressive in some ways when compared to the earlier government position, the focus remains on *employment*, which could be defined as one specific context, just part of our more varied and complex lives and – most importantly, not our single reason for being. For example, in activities designed to develop an individual's self-confidence, the aim would be for this to be of benefit not only in the workplace but also in life more widely. While making some positive recommendations, in the same report, Taylor (2017:87) goes on to suggest the need for a national employability skills framework:

Government should use its convening power to bring together employers and the education sector to develop a consistent approach to employability and lifelong learning... As part of this the government should seek to develop a unified framework of employability skills and encourage stakeholders to use this framework.

Once again, this highlights the importance of seeking to achieve much clearer understanding with all stakeholders, and specifically the need for greater clarity on

what it is exactly that we should be aspiring to achieve. The final sentence in Taylor's statement would potentially be problematic if introduced, as Cole and Hallett (2019: 126) elaborate:

The expectations around this proposed new framework are disingenuously neat: it suggests "educators can match their courses to the framework, employers can match their job vacancies to the skills they require and individuals are more easily able to have greater direction in planning their career" (Taylor, 2017, p. 86). With the UK government now considering these recommendations, the language we use to build our employability frameworks matter even more.

This observation from Taylor is, once more, a clear and overt focus on *skills*. At the same time, there is at least a positive recognition that *employability* goes beyond any single job and is viewed as an ongoing process that spans an individual's career, rather than solely being concerned with a particular employment snapshot in time. This might be suggested to be contradictory to the importance the media, government and institutions currently place on the static employment-related metrics, the former Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey and what is now the *Graduate Outcomes* survey.

The government's belief in the importance of the role of HE in relation to workforce development has continued over the last fifty years. The Leitch Review produced in 2006, highlighted the important role education needed to take in developing skills to improve the competitiveness of the UK economy, (Fearn, 2008). Furthermore, on behalf of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Spilsbury et al. (2010) produced the 2010 Report, *Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK: Key Findings and Implications for Action*. This reported country performance in relation to skills in the workplace on an international basis, which again brings to the fore the importance of understanding, and the interpretation of employability and related strategies and practices that underpin it.

## *Skills*

The skills-focused approach to employability has been criticised since the 1990s according to Holmes, (2001:112):

Despite the considerable body of critical literature (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000), the skills agenda continues to be promoted in policy, at national and institutional level.

The use of the word *skills* may not be considered ideal in relation to establishing more effective approaches to employability, but it does acknowledge interest at the highest levels in enhancing individual's performance in a workplace context. Importantly, it recognises factors beyond subject knowledge alone, which is welcomed.

However, criticism of the focus on skills has strengthened over the years, although there is little evidence that this has had an impact in practice. For example, according to Fallows and Steven (2000:76) HE “must provide its graduates with the skills to be able to operate professionally”. Here, the umbrella term of skills is being used to encapsulate what is, in reality, something much more nuanced and complex. What is also concerning is the notion that education somehow simply transfers these ‘skills’ to students on a simple transactional basis, which does not reflect the complexities underpinning skills development.

As highlighted previously, the focus on development of skills dates back to the 1990s and potentially earlier, while the body of literature on employability has also developed in parallel over the last twenty years or so. For example, Tomlinson (2017a:339) states: “The discourse inflation on skills and attributes within HE would appear to have eclipsed even what employers have espoused on such matters”.

This raises the important question of evidence, and whether the practices adopted to address employability in HE have been informed by the expanding body of literature at all.

Also questioning the overt focus on skills, Holmes (2001:112) states:

Despite the rhetoric surrounding the skills agenda, it is by no means clear that employers should want skills per se; rather, they want graduates they recruit and employ to perform in desirable ways – competently and effectively. It is the behaviour, or performance that is required.

This evidence that research clearly stating the issues with an overt skill-based focus has been available for nearly two decades, yet this does not appear to have impacted on the daily discourse in the media and within government. Here, the *skills gap* remains a constant, an aspiration that potentially leads practice down an unintended path that may have only limited value in terms of achieving national ambitions. More recently,

Holmes, who has a background in human resources, highlights the importance of psychology in the employability debate. This aligns with the work of Goleman (1998) and Mayer and Salovey, (1997) on emotional intelligence (EI) and its importance in relation to becoming more effective in life. The later work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) also makes explicit reference to the relationship between employability and emotional intelligence, including it as a specific area within their *Career Edge* model of graduate employability. This is further evidence that for over twenty years there has been literature available that highlights the kind of person/employee that employers are seeking. Yet this appears to have been mostly ignored and not translated and addressed effectively through the wider education system, with the exception of perhaps those programmes which prepare students for employment in areas such as nursing, social work and teaching. More broadly across other types of programmes there appears to remain an overt and narrow focus on gaining subject knowledge at all levels of education. Furthermore, the umbrella term of ‘skills’ for the purpose of securing a job has now dominated the national agenda for a prolonged period.

Fundamentally, these employment rates and a predominantly quantitative bias could be to the detriment of recognising how vital other more qualitative factors (such as attitude and behaviour’s) are to an individual’s overall development, benefiting their life as a whole, not just in the workplace.

However, with the work of Barnett (2011), Cole and Hallett (2019), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Jackson (2008), Kumar (2007), Knight and Yorke

(2004), Tomlinson (2017a), featuring within the employability and pedagogical literature, there are the beginnings of a body of knowledge that, when combined, advocate a range of desired outcomes from learning that are important and which contribute to individuals being successful across all aspects of life. Whilst these outcomes may not be as readily quantified, this does not diminish their importance and the need to consider a wider range of qualities and dispositions beyond skills. This body of work indicates a need to focus on the kind of people we are, rather than merely what we know or can do, and therefore there is a need to develop learning opportunities that support the individual to develop holistically, beyond knowledge and skills alone.

Starting from the conceptualisation stage with employability, several models and definitions already exist, which include the more diverse outcomes of learning alluded to above and which are notably missing from current discourse and practice. This being the case, the natural next consideration might be around how such models might be implemented in practice and how their individual specific features might be developed. This thinking clearly moves the discussion into the area of learning more broadly, pedagogy and *how we teach*. Good pedagogy would profess to develop students who are independent learners, critical thinkers, and reflective practitioners - problem solvers who are lifelong and lifewide learners (Barnett, 2011 and Jackson, 2008). Employers are likely to desire similar qualities in their employees. So how commonplace are good learning and teaching practices? With increasing student numbers, limitations on staff resources and pressure to produce international standard research, academics and professional service staff face multiple daily pressures, some of which might be perceived to be in tension with the desire to plan and deliver the best learning and teaching opportunities possible.

### *Widening participation and pedagogy*

Building on this theme further, the Widening Participation agenda, supported by the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), began in the mid-1990s and saw a drive to increase the numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds having the opportunity to attend university and gain a degree.



This push was enabled by an allocation of funding through HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England online, 2015). Although well intended, in reality this had a marked impact on many institutions, and overall resulted in much larger numbers of students attending and graduating from university annually.

In 2010/11, 331,000 students graduated from UK institutions (Bolton, 2012). More recently, the Higher Education Statistics Agency reported that in 2016/17 414,340 first degrees were awarded. Comparing these figures to the number of full-time students in 1990 gaining a first degree, this was an increase in the region of 75,000, demonstrating significant growth over the period (Bolton, 2012).

On a positive note, this is certainly evidence of government success in terms of increasing physical access to higher education, and in places widening participation. However, this perhaps may have come with unintended consequences.

With this growth, universities have had to adapt to larger numbers of students and larger class sizes which, in turn, may have potentially led to increased pressure on staff, in terms of both teaching and marking of assessments. In addition, from a broader learning and teaching perspective, in any class of two hundred students or more it would be challenging to know the individual students at any meaningful level, and this may then have an impact on the students' overall personal learning experiences. This then has the potential to ultimately influence retention, attainment and satisfaction in addition to the eventual employment data. These are complex and interconnected areas of work. When designing a curriculum and associated learning activities for larger student cohorts, with limitations determined by the physical learning spaces available, these are factors that may impact on the broader learning and teaching experience for both staff and students. With quality assurance continuing to be a priority for all institutions, this is another area of work that may have also influenced in practice, for example with specific requirements around placements. Meeting required standards for larger cohorts is likely to have directly impacted on resourcing needs and resulting in pressures on staff to support them.

Combined these tasks come together to meet head on with increased expectations from students, as outlined by Biggs and Tang (2011: 4), when they stated:

As participation rates increase, institutions are relying more and more on student fees. This means that students demand high profile programmes that are well taught and will enhance their employment prospects.

Adding this sharpened focus on what students will do and what they expect after they graduate is, for some staff, a step too far. Blackmore et al. (2016) supports this by stating that those academics with a focus on research are unlikely to actively engage with employability, unless it is positioned in a more attractive way. They go on to state that, ultimately, if it comes down to a choice from an academic perspective, they believe teaching will lose against research. The authors here propose a solution that aligns the strategic agendas of both teaching and research, rather than trying to balance them against each other. This sets up an interesting dynamic between the two senior leaders at the Pro Vice Chancellor level, positions that exist in every institution in the sector. Each is responsible for one of these two agendas, and when considering pressures to succeed and potential personal career ambitions, this is not a situation conducive to collaboration.

#### *Ideological and cultural differences across the UK higher education sector*

In this section, I assume that ideology, as a coherent system of ideas within HE, is directly influenced by government policy and funding. New ideas are continually being formed and reformed, directly impacting on the development of cultures within institutions.

At an ideological and cultural level there are a number of significant influences on the UK HE sector. The purpose of higher education and the policy-level influence of government on it has already been discussed within this thesis (see pages 41 to 43), which cites the importance of a raft of policy documents including Dearing (1997), Leitch (2006) and, more recently, the Taylor report (2017) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) from the Department for Education (2017). Each of these reports articulates the government's consistent expectation of HE to produce graduates with the skills necessary to underpin national economic development and growth, and this message varies little over the years. What has changed is the focus on the associated metrics and league tables created as a means to supposedly measure HE performance in relation to this expectation.

The former Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey, now the Graduate Outcomes Survey, remains at the forefront of the government's bank of metrics, replayed in the media and dominantly positioned within the TEF landscape. This is perceived to have a direct impact on institutional reputation, and therefore directly impacts on thinking and ideas within institutions, to ultimately impact on university culture.

With the renewed focus on employment outcomes amplified through the TEF, now the highest weighted of the metrics, the infrastructure of government-funded agencies to support and monitor this work has also evolved over the last five years, with the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) from the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This new body has a specific remit to police the HE sector, ensuring that student experience and employment outcomes remain at the forefront of institutional thinking for the foreseeable future.

The direct influence of government on HE has had an impact in terms of the emergence and growth of the employability agenda as a whole across the sector. With an established government view of success, as measured by the employment metrics, and articulated through what was DLHE and the associated league tables. This is commonly understood at the practice level to involve the development of *employability skills* to support graduates into their first job (e.g. Fallows and Steven, 2000, Leitch, 2006, Robbins, 1963 and Taylor, 2017). With this government view, it is unsurprising that every UK HE institution has invested in a *Careers* or *Careers and Employability Service*. The level of investment at institutional level and how these teams operate internally are largely fairly similar, although there are nuances and differences on an institution by institution basis. For example, certain institutions place emphasis on mandatory work placements for all students, while others offer a more diverse range of work-related learning opportunities. Anecdotally, HE careers and employability teams range in size from 20 - 130 staff.

With OfS positioned as an overarching monitoring body, combined with the high-profile league tables pitting institutions against each other, competition and pressure to raise standards is inevitable. This has an ideological and cultural impact across the sector as a whole, with other variables exerting influence at different levels, such as

institutional mission group or type, and individual institution's simultaneously also having their own individual identity, strategies and practices.

For example, at an ideological and cultural level, would the same views and level of engagement with employability be expressed by academics from Russell Group and more research-focused institutions, compared to those from more modern, Post-92 institutions?

The reality is likely to be mixed. In the case of McCowan (2015), who was based within a Russell Group institution, he had previously been critical of the place of employability in universities, believing that the purpose of higher education reached far beyond simply gaining employment. Interestingly, however, when examining the possible rationales for the stance of individual institutions, resistance to the employability agenda in higher education appears to originate from McCowan's interpretation of the term, which adopts a narrower employment-focused position, rather than a broader and more nuanced conceptualisation.

Conversely, Tomlinson (2017a), who is employed by a different Russell Group institution, could be described as much more of an advocate of the employability agenda. Critically, he interprets employability in a much broader sense than McGowan, defining the concept in terms of a number of human *capitals* that an individual should potentially possess, nurture and develop. The work of Tomlinson is explored and defined in more depth in Chapter 3, and this tension between different interpretations of employability is highlighted later and throughout this thesis.

These are only two examples, and certainly cannot be interpreted as representative of an entire institution or mission group. However, it is interesting to reflect on these interpretations when considering language, thinking and practice in relation to employability, and how they influence the higher education sector. They suggest a causal relationship between *understanding* and *opinion* in relation to the employability agenda. One view might be considered to be more research-informed (that is, someone having engaged with literature related to employability specifically: (Tomlinson, 2017a), while the other is not (McGowan, 2015).

In contrast, on the website of *New Model Institute for Technology & Engineering* based in Hereford, UK, the President and CEO Elena Rodriguez-Falcon states that “you won’t come here to study engineering; you’ll come here to be an engineer”. Their vision is for “Creating life changing opportunities through challenging conventional education” (NMITE, online 2020).

These examples may be cited as existing at opposite ends of the spectrum, in relation to the types of HEI that exist in the UK. This direction and strategic purpose, set at the highest level, is likely to then directly influence the supporting institutional culture that develops underneath. Zhu (2015) talks about the influence of a shared vision on organisational culture in higher education in China. This shared vision may be suggested to influence thinking and interpretations of employability across the wider staff body, although the example quoted from Tomlinson (2017a), demonstrates that there will always be exceptions to the norm.

Variation across academic communities in universities is almost certain, with a narrower view of employability likely to be more prevalent and dominant interpretation in universities with a stronger tradition of being research-intensive. There may be more openness in Post-92 institutions, where can be slightly less of a focus on research with certain academics, and more of an acceptance of the fact that most students are attending university to improve their employment prospects (NUS and CBI, 2011). However, this acceptance may not necessarily guarantee a greater understanding of employability at a conceptual level, and is explored in the results that are shared in Chapters 5 and 6.

### *Employability or learning and teaching?*

Considering existing pedagogies which have the potential to develop students in areas beyond knowledge and skills raises the question of whether the focus should be on *employability* at all. Should it instead be on the importance of good learning and teaching, with provision planned around the breadth of learning experiences provided? Should it also signpost the student to activities outside the curriculum that support them to develop in the areas defined in the employability literature as being important?

In considering how HE is now seeking to address employability, 'The Pedagogy for Employability Group' (2006:6) stated:

Employability and subject-specific learning are complementary not oppositional. What the 'employability agenda' does is to encourage teachers to use pedagogic approaches that are likely to enhance general employability whilst dealing with the specifics of the subject.

This demonstrates the belief that employability can be addressed and developed using appropriate pedagogies and as part of a broader approach to learning and teaching. Looking beyond the more formal environment, the concept of *lifewide learning* from Jackson (2008) articulates the importance of learning that is happening simultaneously in multiple spaces across a student's life, and beyond the existing curriculum-focused learning opportunities. Here it becomes about better supporting students to recognise and maximise their own learning journey in a more holistic way, recognising the benefits and outcomes from learning in spaces across an individual's life and how they come together, manifesting within that individual. The focus then shifts into not only recognising, but also being able to articulate and demonstrate this array of learning in a range of contexts and environments. This directly aligns with the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy, initially introduced in Cole and Hallett (2019)<sup>1</sup>, but which was work that I independently developed as a direct result of this thesis.

### *The power of metrics*

It is suggested in this thesis that the education system in the UK is driven by performance metrics and league tables, pitting schools, colleges and universities against each other. Adopting a critical stance, it could also be suggested that in education there is currently an obsession with seeking to measure everything. Whilst this is often government-led, recognition also needs to be given to the media here, highlighting the potential power and influence they have as a body on the shape of education today. *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *QS Rankings* and the *Best Universities Guide* are just a few examples of national newspapers and websites that publish and

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<sup>1</sup> The Dimensions for Learning taxonomy was developed by Cole as a direct result of this doctoral research – and was then formally written up for this thesis. I used the figure as part of the chapter by Cole and Hallett (2019), but it is acknowledged in that chapter as work by Cole (2018), reflecting the fact that this was work developed independently.

promote league tables covering all universities - from Russell Group institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, to Post-92 institutions such as Southampton Solent University and the University of East London. There are vast differences between these institutions: they all have degree-awarding power, they all have students, but beyond that the similarities begin to disappear. Yet they are compared like for like, one against the other, based on their league table positions. The metric most pertinent to this research is the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), now the *Graduate Outcomes* survey (since 2019). These measures are static snapshots of graduate employment rates in professional or managerial positions on a specific day six months after graduation (in the DLHE) and shifting to fifteen month after graduation for the new Graduate Outcomes data. This measure is often wrongly labelled as an *employability league table or metric*. This is supported by Bridgstock (2009:33) who states:

In both Australia and the UK, graduates' first-destination employment status a few months after course completion is used as the primary graduate employability performance indicator (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2002). This suggests that graduate full-time employment rates have become, in many instances, easily measurable proxies for graduate employability. In both countries, universities are accordingly under significant funding pressure for their graduates to find permanent, full-time employment quickly.....Use of first-destination data in this way is problematic.

Not only is this data being mislabelled on occasion, it highlights how whole institutions are now under significant pressure to act in response to these figures. This is despite the original aims of DLHE being somewhat different, according to Blackwell and Edmonson (2016: 45), who point out that the original purpose of DLHE was to provide feedback for Careers Services. It has since become a "high-stakes institutional performance measure used in newspaper league tables". Whilst this evolution of the use of the metric may be understandable, whether corresponding changes have also been made to the resourcing and infrastructure that supports this work remain a critical consideration.

The published *Employability League Tables* utilise a methodology through which universities are ranked based on how highly they are favoured by particular employers. This bears no resemblance to any of the definitions of employability in the literature reviewed and could be considered misleading. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is a direct relationship between the terms *employment* and *employability*, they are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably, even though this is often the case in the daily discourse across the HE sector, in the UK and globally.

The DLHE figures and corresponding league tables are an example of government-imposed metrics that are now a requirement of all universities. Across all subject areas, these figures are combined and collectively presented as one overall league table, which is then made public and positioned as an apparent indication of the quality of each institution. Here Blackwell and Edmonson (2016: 39) offer the following observations in relation to DLHE:

Employment outcomes are important to stakeholders in higher education and feature prominently in plans for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)... The main source of current data is a destination survey of all graduates six months after graduation, the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, which is complemented by a follow up survey three-and-a-half years after graduation, known as longitudinal DLHE.

Much has changed since this was written. With the launch of the new Graduate Outcomes survey and the changes to weighting within the relevant data set as part of the renamed *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework* (TEF), the employability agenda has never been so high profile. HE league tables have become a global phenomenon, with institutions even being compared against each other on an international basis. Comparisons are made across countries, cultures and contexts, with apparent disregard for the variables that clearly exist.

Metrics have become a driving force in education, not only through DLHE, but also the measurement of institutional student retention and attainment, and through the data from the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS). Combined, these three metrics are now being utilised as proxies for *Teaching Excellence* and are core to the TEF,



and although these measures existed prior to the TEF they have now conveniently taken centre stage as a united data set.

Published institutional metrics have become key levers for potential intervention and action from the OfS. The OfS has clearly articulated its adopted mandate to take responsibility for setting standards in terms of university performance in the Graduate Outcomes data, intervening where the results are flagged and deemed in need of further action.

The reality is that these quantitative measures are the focus of government and the media, and therefore become the focus for most university senior leaders. With the high-profile nature of university league tables, reputation is a major consideration for most, if not all, Vice Chancellors and their senior management teams. Being pragmatic, as alluded to earlier, their careers will be directly related to the results they are perceived to have led and achieved – their reputation is directly associated, by senior leaders in HE, with league table results. Consequently, there is enormous pressure on all institutions to improve or at least maintain their current performance, resulting in institutional-level strategic plans being designed to deliver on these ambitions.

The focus on driving up reputation and league table position now directly influences strategy, both at a macro level across the sector and at a micro level within each institution. Strategy drives practice: it determines where financial and human resources are allocated, it determines infrastructure, and it dictates operational practice. It is not acceptable for institutions to fail - too much is at stake. With the reduction in direct government funding to institutions, and the financial pressure now more firmly placed on students, universities cannot afford to lose students for any reason. Recruitment, retention and attainment have therefore never been so important to the sector. Poor performance in these areas will result in a lower league table position, which negatively impacts on reputation, a situation that is not acceptable to those held accountable for the leadership and management of HE institutions.

So how are HE institutions responding to these pressures, and what actions are happening in practice? The following section explores this question.

## *Employability and the curriculum*

Careers education as a feature within HE pre-dates the emergence of employability as an issue. Stanbury (2005:2) defines Career Education as:

...those formal processes that empower individuals to identify develop and articulate the skills, qualifications, experiences, attributes and knowledge that will enable them to make an effective transition into their chosen futures, and manage their careers as lifelong learners, with a realistic and positive attitude.

This definition is similar to those which will be outlined in the next chapter relating to employability, particularly when describing the elements involved, and when recognising that employability is an ongoing process throughout an individual's life (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Hillage and Pollard, 1998, Kumar, 2007 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

Stanbury (2005) also suggests that Careers Education can feature as a component of, and be placed within, a wider employability framework such as the model of employability developed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), which contains *Career Development Learning*, as an essential component within their construct. This is similarly articulated as *Career Identity* by Fugate et al. (2004) in their *Psycho-social model* of employability.

As previously highlighted, the place of *employability* as an area of work within HE has certainly been the subject of discussion for many years. Historically, some of the first courses offered by HEIs had direct relevance to employment opportunities such as law, religion and medicine (Yorke and Knight, 2006a). While the language and terminology used, a such as *employability*, may be relatively new in the sector, the principle of HE engaging in this area of work is not. Many former polytechnics and colleges, now universities, have a strong background in offering vocationally focused degree programmes, such as nursing, teaching, furniture design or social work (Yorke and Knight, 2006a). Clearly, the emergence of University Technical Colleges (UTC), and the current government focus on Degree Apprenticeships and the new *T levels*, is further evidence of the perceived need for this form of education.

Considering the models and definitions of employability that exist, including those of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Hillage and Pollard (1998), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a), while vocational degree programmes may prepare students for employment in a specific profession, do they support students in developing the personal qualities and dispositions, attitudes and behaviours that are features of these various models, too? Certain courses may be taking positive action to address a number of these areas, but do they all - and specifically relating to this research, is this the case for undergraduate sports programmes?

In a bid to address the kinds of misconceptions which can result in reluctance by some academics to fully embrace employability as a concept, Knight and Yorke (2004:37) developed the USEM model of employability as:

...an attempt to put thinking about employability on a more scientific basis, partly because of the need to appeal to academic staff on their own terms by referring to research evidence and theory.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this may have worked in part with academics who have engaged with this body of literature. For others, however, remaining uninformed on this area of work has led to continued misunderstandings in relation to employability as a concept. Subsequently, this might be suggested to have had a direct influence on how these individuals have chosen to interpret and address employability - or not, in some cases - within their own activities and with their students.

The common misconception of employability being merely about *skills* and something that needs to be taught separately, away from subject-specific content still exists. This needn't be the case, with the connections between good student learning in higher education and employability being highlighted by Cole and Hallett (2019) and Yorke and Knight, (2006a). The perceived tensions that can exist between subject-specific knowledge and employability may be dispelled, on the basis that employability is conceptualised as an area of work that extends beyond the discourse of skills and being concerned with merely securing that first destination job.

Directly related to the sports industry, these misconceptions ultimately have an impact, as suggested by Minten (2010:67, citing Bacon, 1996, Skills Active 2006 and SPIRITO

2001) who states: “Higher Education institutions have been accused of failing to produce employable graduates who meet the needs of employers”. This is an example of how the expectations of industry are not always being met and that universities that are currently offering sports-related degree programmes should be responsible for supporting students, developing them to eventually becoming effective within their chosen employment sector.

### *Resistance*

While *employability* as a priority area of work within HE is not new, it is far from being universally understood and accepted by academics across the sector. An example of the reluctance to fully embrace the concept of employability is provided by Professor Roger Brown from Liverpool Hope University, who was quoted in an article by Fearn, (2008:134) as saying:

The purpose of higher education is the education and empowerment of the individual. We should be recognizing intellectual development. The course, and the job a student goes on to, is secondary to that.

This view is supported by the work of Honeybone (2002), who also questions the place of employability and what they refer to as the *skills agenda* in HE. This illustrates the misconception of employability being viewed as merely about gaining a set of skills (Holmes, 2001) for the purpose of employment. However, views of both Brown and Honeybone fail to fully acknowledge the additional ways that an individual may develop, both personally and emotionally.

Viewing this through a different lens, the definition of pedagogy by Zukas and Malcom (2002:215) cited in Coffield et al. (2004:49) offers an alternative view that highlights the importance of subject-specific knowledge and its direct relationship with the external environment, in what they refer to as “the social context, purpose... and the nature and social role of educational knowledge”. This definition suggests a clear need to consider teaching with a context and purpose in mind, and not to teach in a bubble, without connections and direct relevance to the environment that students will ultimately enter. It recognises that intellectual development is only one factor in the

education process and that an individual student's all-round personal development is also key.

Knight and Yorke (2004:4) support this thinking, and disagree with the opinions of Brown:

Arguably, in terms of employment, a degree is little more than a label for an often-ambiguous skill set that the holder must aim to present as effectively as possible. By failing to recognise this, it is possible that many of these graduates are not doing all they could to show employers that their qualifications holds practical value.

Clearly, there appears to be support for other factors to be taken into consideration beyond the accumulation of academic knowledge, and that the ability to reflect, recognise and articulate wider learning is an equally important quality in graduates.

Continuing with this theme, considering the context and eventual application of knowledge to practice is important when teaching students. This means seeing current education as the beginning of a lifelong learning process and empowering the student to embark on this journey in a positive and proactive manner. This is supported by Jarvis (2002) cited in Kumar (2007:18), who states:

The career management paradigm is not so much about making the right occupational choice as it is about equipping people with the skills to make the myriad choices necessary throughout their lives to become healthy, self-reliant citizens, able to cope with constant change in rapidly changing labour markets and maintain balance between life and work roles.

Once again, the use of the word *skills* is evident, when what is really being described is the combination of skills with other qualities and dispositions (Barnett, 2011). This quotation from Jarvis (2002) could be considered to align with some conceptualisations of employability, such as Career Edge by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and the work of Fugate et al. (2004), demonstrating the relationship between career management and employability. These conceptualisations are fundamentally concerned with working with students to prepare them for the future, empowering them

to develop across a range of areas that will support them throughout their lives, and enabling them to make well-informed, considered choices and decisions that will help them in employment and with life in general.

### *Quality assurance*

When exploring where desired qualities and dispositions might be developed, the first area for consideration is the existing provision, namely, the curriculum. The expectations of those possessing degrees, in terms of the capabilities students should be able to demonstrate, was stressed by the Quality Assurance Agency (2008) with their subject benchmark statements for HE. The quality assurance landscape has changed radically over the last few years. As already mentioned, HEFCE has now become the OfS, and the QAA has been contracted to manage the quality assurance work of OfS. The Quality Code, which sets standards for all degree programmes, was revised in 2018 and has largely been simplified from the previous version. The onus is now on institutions to self-regulate, with the metrics within TEF already discussed becoming the markers for when intervention by the QAA may be required.

At a more granular level, the QAA sets specific subject-level benchmarks, intended for use by academics in the curriculum design process:

Subject Benchmark Statements describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in subject specific areas, and in respect of particular qualifications. They provide a picture of what graduates in a particular subject might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of the programme of study.

### Quality Assurance Agency (2016:2)

*Sport* as a subject area is grouped with Events, Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism, which means that the level of detail in each of these strands is kept high, and in practice is somewhat limited. When the word *sport* is used, much of the content that follows is specifically related to sports science as opposed to other sports-related subjects, such as sports management and sports development.

What might have been expected in the case of sports degree programmes, would be that when establishing the subject-specific benchmarks, the QAA would have initially worked closely with Skills Active, which at the time was the Sector Skills Council responsible for setting professional standards in relation to the competencies, knowledge and skills required in professions related to sport. This responsibility shifted to the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) in 2017. However, according to QAA (2008 and 2016) documents, the groups formed to review the Subject Benchmark Statements for sport consisted only of academics, subject bodies, including the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), and representatives from the Higher Education Academy. Looking back to previous benchmarks written for these subject areas, these were also developed exclusively by academics, and in the most recent revisions, there is no mention of input from any industry-specific group or representative with a clear responsibility for sport, from the outset, aside from the 'sports science sector'. For an organisation such as Skills Active, and now CIMSPA, not to be involved from the outset is somewhat surprising, considering the prominence of the employability agenda, and this demonstrates a disjointed approach and missed opportunity to formally establish current and minimum professional standards mutually agreed by industry and HE. This disconnect is not only prevalent in the case of sport, as can be found from the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) (n.d:1) which states:

It is clearly for academics themselves to describe their courses and the qualities and capabilities they aim to develop in their students. However, increased dialogue with employers may help those tasked with identifying and developing competences and also may promote more effective and responsive recruitment behaviour amongst employers. It may also be helpful to foster a shared language around competencies/key skills/attributes etc. that is meaningful to all stakeholders.

To further evidence the existence of this disjointed approach, the CIHE (n.d: 4) goes on to state that employers:

...do not appear fully to appreciate the skills that academics declare can be developed through the study of specific subjects. This suggests that the gap

between academics and employers is one, not of aspiration, but of awareness and understanding.

This illustrates a lack of co-ordination between different stakeholders, each with a vested interest in the overall development of students within HE. While it is recognised that institutions are individually responsible for their own programme design, involving appropriate representatives from industry in setting standards within the design process would have provided the opportunity to align the needs of industry and the needs of higher education to form a shared common vision. This opportunity has clearly been missed in relation to the Subject Benchmark Statements for sport, and potentially the work that HE sports departments are currently conducting in relation to employability.

In an attempt to bridge the divide between education and employers, the *Higher Education Endorsement Programme* was first developed by Skills Active in 2010. It was designed to address this issue, and also intended to raise awareness throughout HE of the need for appropriate content in sports degree programmes. To achieve these aims, the National Occupational Standards were used as part of a pilot project, to which only thirteen institutions applied. The project failed to develop beyond this initial pilot, and in 2017 CIMSPA took over the responsibility for workforce development from Skills Active and is now revisiting the concept of a *Higher Education Endorsement Programme* directly linked to newly developed national occupational standards. To date, there has been interest from several institutions in this work and testing of this endorsement programme has begun.

When the Skills Active pilot was launched, there were 130 higher and further education colleges and institutions in the UK offering 1,934 sport related programmes, Pitchford cited in Collins (2010). However, at this time, most of these institutions appear to have not been making connections between their own sports-related programmes and the nationally agreed and defined competencies, knowledge areas and standards developed by the sports industry. This lack of an industry- aligned approach, it may be suggested, could potentially have had consequences in terms of the standards of graduates completing these sports degree programmes, and who were consequently moving on to work within the sector. This scenario has only become further exaggerated by the growth and variety of sports degree programmes that now exist,



and the apparent continued disconnect between stakeholders. It is, of course, acknowledged that there is great deal of good practice taking place between some academics, leading sports programmes and employers, but are all sports programmes engaging with employers and are all students benefiting? This is a key challenge for institutions across the sector today.

### *The employer perspective*

Reference has been made to the need to engage with employers in order to develop an effective approach to employability. It is therefore important to not only consider literature and the theoretical models, but also the current perspectives of employers in industry and their opinions of the quality of graduates today. The reality is that these views and opinions vary greatly. Limited research exists on the opinions of employers specific to sport, therefore the literature search for this study was broadened to include employers in other sectors.

Kogan (1985) (cited in Ramsden, 1992) discussed how some employers considered non-graduates to actually be better than graduates, as they felt that university graduates did not understand the importance of the market and its forces. They also found that most employers believed that HE did improve their employees' general skills, academic ability, personal qualities, flexibility and motivation in particular. However, these personal qualities were not considered to be enough in isolation. In 2006, a survey of two hundred and thirty-five employers by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) identified *commitment and drive* and *motivation and enthusiasm* as being the two most important and valued *graduate skills* (cited in Kumar, 2007:111). While the value of specific skills or qualities may be stressed, it is clear that they will not determine success in isolation, and that the ideal would be a combination of qualities, skills and dispositions that can be applied in context.

Ramsden (1992) contributes to the debate by stating that there was a range of employer views on graduates entering industry. It is only natural that employers will form opinions on the abilities and potential of new graduates applying to join them, and there are certainly differences in these views. Archer and Davison (2008) produced a report on behalf of CIHE, a network of blue-chip companies that worked

strategically with universities to develop the knowledge-based economy in the UK. This group offered a more clear-cut industry perspective:

This report highlights the findings from a pilot survey of 233 employers and shows that there is a need for action by universities, employers, students and government to address both the reality and perception of the skills deficit in our graduates.

(cited in Archer and Davison, 2008:5)

One again, use of the term *skills* is evident, and this is a further example of its overt use as a term intended to encapsulate everything that is hoped that students will be able to demonstrate, when clearly this is not the case. There is no clarification of what is meant by *the skills deficit* and this assertion lacks the detail necessary to be truly meaningful.

An understanding of what employers are actually seeking was established through the work of Harvey *et al.* (1997) cited in (Kumar, 2007:215), which stated:

Employers indicate that what they want now, and in the foreseeable future, are intelligent, flexible, adaptable employees who are quick to learn and who can deal with change....In a future world of uncertainty, employers do not want people who are unable to work on a range of tasks simultaneously, people who are resistant to new approaches or who are slow to respond to cues... Employers want people who can rapidly fit into the workplace culture, work in teams, exhibit good interpersonal skills, communicate well, take on responsibility for an area of work, and perform efficiently and effectively to add value to the organization organisation – they want adaptive recruits.

While the work of Harvey *et al.* (1997) is not specifically concerned with the sports industry and was written over twenty years ago, the sentiments appear to still be in line with anecdotal opinions voiced by individuals who are currently involved and active in the sports sector today, and which are shared in the following section.

More recently the Higher Education Academy online (2018) included a note on *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*, which it suggests can generally be agreed to fall into the following categories:

1. Literacies (literacy, numeracy, citizenship, digital and media)
2. Competencies (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration)
3. Character qualities (curiosity, initiative, persistence, resilience, adaptability and leadership)

Informed by direct input from employers, the diversity of requirements here is evident. What is also abundantly clear, is that these are not all skills, as the name, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills* suggests, yet 'skills' has once again been used as an umbrella term. There are implications here for all educators, regardless of the stage of the education journey they are working at. Language influences how individuals will articulate these areas in turn with their own students. The issue here is that developing *skills* will require certain learning and teaching activities, whereas developing *behaviours and attitudes* requires potentially different learning and teaching activities. That there is a direct relationship between our thoughts, interpretations and subsequent practice and in this regard, the discourse associated with employability that results becomes a crucial consideration.

What is also evident is that the preferences of employers, in terms of the qualities and dispositions that they desire in their employees, have not fundamentally changed over the years. This being the case, why is there still an issue with some employers being unhappy with the standard of graduates? Why and where is the disconnect occurring?

One Chief Executive of a sports organisation, when asked for their view of current standards in the sports development sector in 2008, stated:

I would have to agree that too many in the industry are not 'good enough'. It comes down to the poor view we hold outside our own sector, the lack of professionalism as judged by others, and therefore those who can do, and those who enjoy sport as an activity become Sports Development Officers without fully understanding the whole picture and their career pathways.

A second Chief Executive in 2009, when asked for their view on the same topic, made similar observations and questioned the ability of people in the sector to undertake 'deep community sports development interventions'. They also questioned whether individuals in the current workforce possessed the personal qualities necessary to work in the harder-to-reach and more challenging communities. Their view was that the sector should consider the opportunity to attract *non-sports people* to work in the sports environment, people who have experience and have developed in other areas, such as via youth or social work, and who could then translate and apply these competencies, personal qualities and skills in a sporting context.

This anecdotal evidence is supported by a small number of researchers who make specific reference to the sports industry, such as Minten (2010:67), who states "Over a number of years there has been increasing concern over the employability of sport graduates in the UK". These sentiments are further supported by Pitchford, (cited in Collins, 2010), who delves deeper, considering the possible causes for this apparent decline in standards in the sports development sector.

Related to the issues discussed above, Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2005) highlight the growing amount of literature in the sport and recreation sector, making specific reference to work focused on the competencies of employees, albeit more within the health and fitness industry and employment in sport overseas, (Koustelios, 2003; Horch and Schutte, 2003; Hurd and McLean, 2004 cited in Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2005:167). These findings echo the thinking raised at the start of this chapter, that employability is now considered to be a global challenge, and while sport is being highlighted, this sector is really not that different to many others.

Adding to the challenges that exist in designing appropriate degree programmes to develop graduates capable of launching their career in the sport sector, Pitchford and Bacon (2005) questioned the legitimacy of leisure management degree programmes as a distinct discipline in their own right. They suggest that these programmes have been constructed by academics with a background in leisure management who were seeking to stake their claim to academic credibility and career security. Could the same perspective be applied when considering other academics and the provision of other sports-related degree programmes and titles in England? With such a diverse range of sports programmes available, in terms of curriculum content, this variety

could be partly due to the diverse nature of the sports industry today, but is more likely to be attributed to those individual academics who designed the programmes themselves, based on their personal backgrounds and the needs of their respective institutions. For example, sports development degree titles can contain sports science modules as part of the curriculum. In such a case, the question needs to be asked: how relevant is this content in practice today, and is this a result of convenience rather than necessity?

Pitchford (cited in Collin, 2010) suggests that individuals working in sports development may be well qualified in terms of subject specific knowledge, but that the issue in question is twofold, first, is the subject knowledge in relation to the environment they are working in correct, considering the diversity of courses, module topics and subject specialisms previously discussed? Second, are sports industry employees being effective in applying their knowledge in context, within the community and with the full range of partners and stakeholders that they are tasked with working in partnership with? The figures over the last decade in terms of participation in sport, levels of obesity and inactivity in children and adults would perhaps suggest otherwise. It is also ironic that in a bid by government to raise standards in all levels of education, focusing on grades and areas that are most conveniently measured may have inadvertently contributed to the possible drop in standards in other areas, and more specifically here, in relation to what are often labelled the *soft skills* such as empathy, emotional intelligence, reflective practice and other interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. These employability qualities and dispositions are essential to any job, and particularly in an industry where working with people and working in partnerships is critical in order to be effective. With the current omission of these personal qualities as required areas of learning, it is perhaps unsurprising that students may then lack them in practice.

In relation to the personal qualities that are particularly important in the sports industry, Covey (2004) introduces the concept of the *emotional bank account*, where the amount of effort an individual invests in a relationship and how they treat others, will benefit them in terms of trust, open communication and how they are treated in return. This is a succinct illustration of the basis foundations needed for any effective relationship and partnership. If those graduates from sports programmes are

incapable of nurturing such relationships in this way, the lack of impact across the sector might be considered again to be unsurprising.

Further justification for focusing on learning across a wider range of areas is highlighted by Brown et al. (2002:19), who state “Academic qualifications are the first tick in the box and then we move on. Today we simply take them for granted”. This highlights the fact that employers today look beyond academic qualifications and value other factors that play a major role in influencing an individual’s performance in the workplace. An example of this, alluded to earlier, can be seen in sports development, where most job advertisements simply state a *sports degree* as a requirement, not mentioning a specific field or knowledge area as being essential. This is supported by the findings of Purcell and Pitcher (1996) and the Institute of Student Employers (2017), demonstrating little movement in this position over the years.

Demands of industry will certainly vary from sector to sector. In some industry sectors, subject knowledge may be most important for an employee to possess, for example in design, manufacturing or information technology. However, for industries that require more human interaction as central to any role, such as sport, other competencies, qualities, attitudes and behaviours may be relatively more important, over and above specific knowledge. This reinforces the need for learning to be considered in its most holistic sense, with learning opportunities across a greater variety of areas that support student development across a wide range of qualities and dispositions, in combination with the necessary and ongoing focus on knowledge acquisition and utilisation.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, employability as a concept has been introduced, along with its origins and place in the HE sector today. The issue of understanding, interpretation and the resulting discourse around employability has been highlighted as problematic, and several of the drivers that may influence this have been introduced. The discourse specifically anchored around skills has also been highlighted as a significant challenge, and as a point of focus is inadequate in terms of effectively addressing the employability agenda.

The notion of student learning needing to extend beyond subject-based knowledge has been identified, highlighting the importance of learning across other areas that each contribute to developing personal qualities and dispositions that are critical for future success, in both an employment context and in life more widely.

There are several models and theories that have been developed over the last decade that could be utilised in a bid to address the overarching challenge that addressing *employability* presents, (e.g. Cole, 2019 cited in Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Tomlinson, 2017a, Yorke and Knight, 2006). These models and theories are rooted in several inter-related subject areas, spanning psychology, employability, career management and pedagogy, and these will be considered in more depth in the following chapter, addressing their overall relevance in informing the development of more effective approaches to employability in the future.

## Chapter 3

# The theoretical evidence base: employability, models and definitions

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, employability was introduced as a term regularly used across the HE sector, including its origins and how it is currently understood and described in the daily discourse of government and the media, and within the literature. The commonly held understanding of employability as being skills-focused, primarily for securing employment was also highlighted.

This chapter will introduce and critique a relatively *hidden* body of work, examining the broader concept, definitions and models of employability contained within the literature. A number of these models will be considered in depth, to identify similarities and differences between them. The constituent features of these models will also be explored, reflecting on whether they currently align with the understanding and interpretations of employability articulated by the government, the media and institutions at strategic and practice level within undergraduate sports programmes in the UK, and as introduced in the previous chapter.

The relationship between employability, pedagogy, lifelong learning, competencies, interpersonal and intrapersonal learning, practical intelligence and tacit knowledge will also be considered in this chapter. Importantly, learning across multiple spaces is discussed, and specifically how learning around careers education can often be confused with employability and, as a result, disconnected from other areas of learning. The notion and need to connect these episodes of learning across multiple spaces and contexts is flagged again, calling for more holistic and diverse approaches to learning. The value of learning beyond subject knowledge alone is made clear, highlighting a number of other critical areas of learning that are crucial to support a student's long-term future success, but which may often be missing or implicit in our current interpretations, discourse, pedagogies and curriculums.



Finally, this chapter introduces a body of work that is critical to consider if the current understanding of stakeholders highlighted thus far is to ever evolve, and to enable the enhancement of future approaches to employability. This is one of the specific research aims of this study. This chapter challenges the current assumptions that directly shape the employability agenda, and the resulting approaches across the HE sector. This has been raised in the previous chapter and is explored throughout this study.

## **Definitions and models**

McQuaid et al. (2005) describe employability from the perspective of supporting the unemployed, socially disadvantaged and those in employment. Similarly, Fugate et al. (2004) present their psycho-social model of employability in response to the need to support those unemployed and currently employed in the workforce in the US. Both papers place emphasis on employment and staying employed. McQuaid et al. (2005) describe this as the *supply side* and *demand side* of employability, with the supply side being focused on the characteristics, skills and qualities of the individual. They refer to this as a *narrow concept* of employability, an individual's readiness for work, while describing the demand side as the *broader* approach to employability, concerned more with external factors such as the demands of the labour market, how to search for jobs and whether an individual can find and change employment.

Minten (2010), in her work on sports degree undergraduates and employability, also refers to this broader view of employability, considering factors external to the individual and their direct influence. Minten (2010:68) adds to her case by citing Moreau and Leathwood (2006), who suggest that there has been too much emphasis on employability as a 'construct of individual attributes and as an individual's responsibility'. Brown et al. (2002), McQuaid and Lindsey (2005) and Morley (2001) are also cited in Minten (2010) as proposing that employability is influenced by the labour market and the nature and structure of the organisations working within that labour market.

This raises the question of whether this not the same as factoring in *context*, which is already accounted for in a number of previous definitions and models such, as ( Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Hillage and Pollard 1998 and Knight and Yorke, 2004). Knight

and Yorke discuss *skilful practices*, that is, the ability to apply knowledge and skills learnt in a given context. Hillage and Pollard explicitly state the importance of an individual being able to apply knowledge, skills and attitude in context. Dacre Pool and Sewell include *Career Development Learning* in their model, which includes knowledge of the labour market and an individual's ability to effectively position themselves within it. While not specifically a model of employability, the work of Kumar (2007) relates to an individual's personal, academic and career development. It makes direct reference to the importance of the dynamic between *self-awareness* and *opportunities*, and how an individual needs to relate to specific and appropriate opportunities available to align with their personal motivation, abilities and personality - once again, accounting for context. Therefore, the argument that previous research focuses too much on the individual and not enough on external factors is perhaps questionable.

If an individual has developed strong self-awareness and social awareness, they should be able to reflect and evaluate, and will be more capable of adapting to new environments and new situations. This is the very essence of employability and models that focus more on the individual will be discussed further later.

If the focus is shifted onto employers as the major consideration within the employability construct, how might this be addressed in practice? What will the practical implications be of shifting the emphasis away from the individual and into an area where there is little to no control, and to an expansive and diverse environment where there is a limited ability for change or to exert influence? The external environment is clearly a relevant factor to consider, but to do so at the expense of the focus on the individual makes it difficult to envisage any positive outcomes as a result.

Whilst collectively these views of employability highlight important factors worthy of consideration, the broader, demand side view of employability is pragmatically beyond the control of any single organisation. The only way the education system can respond is to help prepare graduates as individuals who have an awareness of these external factors, and who embark on their career armed with knowledge and understanding of the world they are entering.

The narrower, supply side view, which could be argued to include the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Tomlinson (2017a), Yorke and Knight (2004) focuses on the individual and which areas they should develop in order to enhance their employability. As already alluded to, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) include career development learning within their model of employability and Tomlinson (2017a) also highlights the importance of social capital and the importance of networks and connections - inherently there is an external focus here, as there is with *Career Identity* in the model by Fugate et al. (2004). This suggests that it is possible to have a view of employability, that - according to the definitions of McQuaid et al. (2005) - can be both narrow and broad simultaneously? These contradictory terms bring into question the legitimacy of this original definition from McQuaid et al. (2005) and the relative usefulness of such terms, at least in the context that they were originally described.

The wider benefits of the conceptual models of employability need to be highlighted at this point. For example, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and their *Career Edge* model is strongly aligned with an employment context. However, in reality, an individual may employ the same qualities, knowledge, skills and dispositions developed through the learning they stipulate across multiple contexts within their life, not solely in the context of work. Yet this is not how this model is positioned, as it is cited as being specifically for the purpose of enhancing future graduate employment. Which raises the question of whether this particular contextual focus is most effective in positioning this valuable piece of work. Employment in some form is important, but it is not a discrete and separate part of life, it is an integral and connected part of it.

This presents a possible alternative interpretation of *narrow definitions of employability*. Why should the focus be on learning that supports activity for an average of only eight hours each day, when it is possible to focus on areas of learning that will support individuals to be successful across all aspects of their daily life? To narrow this focus and position learning purely for a work context seems to be unnecessarily limiting.

The broader and more inclusive approach to learning for employability called for in the previous chapter aligns well with work that has emerged from the US. In *Learning Reconsidered: A campus wide focus on the student experience* written by Keeling

(2004), they discuss the importance of learning that occurs which is supported by *Student Affairs*, and how these activities need to be joined up with the academic learning that is taking place in the classroom. This connected approach to learning also aligns with the work of Jackson (2008) and Barnett (2011) around *lifewide learning*, and the notion of *contextual learning* highlighted by Fugate et al. (2004) that will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

Keeling states that there is a need to break down the silos that currently exist, and that work concerned with student success is positioned more effectively when it is connected at institutional level. The work of student affairs in the US could be equated to the work of careers and employability services here in the UK, as an area where learning is already occurring, but which is often seen as residing outside of the formal education environment and therefore potentially positioned at risk of being disconnected, as opposed to viewing it as firmly positioned and supporting the more formal learning opportunities within the classrooms.

How might the context and focus for work undertaken in institutions, to support students futures, be best determined? Within the wider the body of literature there are several definitions and models of *employability* including (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Hillage and Pollard, 1998, Knight and Yorke 2004, Minten, 2010 and Tomlinson, 2017a), a number of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Collectively, however, these often contrasting views may be contributing, to the apparent contradictions and misunderstandings that currently exist in HE, government and the media, concerning what employability really is, and how it can best be developed in students. This is supported by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007:277), who state:

In recent years a number of models of employability have been proposed. Whilst these models go some way towards capturing the elusive concept of employability, they are either too elaborate to be practically useable or too simple to do justice to this multifaceted issue.

This is further supported by Artess et al. (2017:14) who state:

This agenda is often led by policy makers but is also articulated by a wide range of other stakeholders including HEPs, parents, students and graduates (Govender and Taylor 2015).

With definitions being articulated by numerous parties, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are differences in opinion in what employability really means, and how best to address it in practice.

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) go on to raise the concern that too many people may have an over-simplistic view of employability, seeing it as being simply about securing a job, or developing a number of skills. This view is supported by Cole and Hallett (2019), Higdon (2016), Yorke and Knight (2006a) and again by Minten (2010:68) who states: “There is a general consensus that employability is more than just about obtaining a job, but beyond this point there is disagreement”.

These views clearly contradict the government’s use - or some may say misuse - of *First Destinations* and the Graduate Prospects data (details of a graduate’s first professional or managerial level job), first mentioned in the previous chapter. This data is required from all universities and is used as a proxy measure for the effectiveness of a university’s work in relation to what often gets referred to as *employability*. These figures also feature in the *Key Information Statistics* (KIS), which was work first introduced by the organisation formerly known as HEFCE and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Since 2012 it has become mandatory to publish these data sets on the course pages of every university website in the country. This move was an attempt to provide *useful data* and supporting information to prospective students and their families, in order to help them in deciding which institution would best suit their requirements.

Unfortunately, this relatively short-term view “only provides a very vague and imprecise indication of what the student has gained” (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007:278). *First Destination* data does not provide a valid indication of a student’s long-term ability to continue securing jobs, start their own business, advance throughout their careers, or be successful over a sustained period throughout their lifetime (Bridgstock, 2009). Nor does it provide any indication of the other factors which

may influence securing of an appropriate position, such as a student's potential financial pressures, which clearly may have an impact on the selection of their first job.

In addition, how job roles are coded in the DLHE survey, now Graduate Outcomes, is also an issue, and whether this first job is considered to be of a graduate level, professional or managerial, or not. This is one of the main qualifying factors of a university's perceived overall success in relation to employability. Collectively, these observations highlight several potential flaws at the highest level, and a disconnect in terms of really seeking to measure the impact of best practice in relation to work in employability.

Much of the employability research to date has taken an interpretive approach (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Hillage and Pollard, 1998, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Minten, 2010 and Tomlinson, 2017a), seeking to define the complex concept of employability and its component features. This research will also adopt an interpretive approach but will look specifically at the relationship between how employability is understood and interpreted within individual institutions at a strategic level, and then specifically in sports departments, and how this strategy is translated into practice.

Taking a longer term view into consideration, *The Pedagogy for Employability Group* produced a number of reports on behalf of the Higher Education Academy, aimed at academics and those interested in learning more about the area of employability. This group's belief, which is now widely accepted, is that jobs are normally no longer for life (Hawkins, 1999, The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006). This highlights the importance of individuals becoming more adaptable, flexible and able to develop their competencies, capabilities and knowledge in order to be effective in potentially different environments and throughout their careers. This is supported by Yorke and Knight (2006a:4) who state: "employability is not something static but something that a person can develop throughout life". To take this one stage further, the suggestion would be that in order to develop a successful career, an individual must focus on developing a number of areas throughout their lives, well beyond their time in formal education. The student's introduction to employability as a concept in HE should therefore just be the beginning: the real challenge is to then ensure that they will embrace the concept of lifelong learning, continuing well beyond their three or four

years in a supportive environment. This also limits the potential value of the static lists of skills that are often generated in response to the employability agenda, but which may very quickly become outdated.

Considering timescales as inherent within the concept of employability highlights the fundamental differences between *employment* and *employability*, which are all too often confused, muddled and overlooked (Bridgstock, 2009, Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Minten, 2010,). Employment is very much about the now; it is about a job for today, and is therefore a relatively short-term view. Employability, however, is typically articulated as being much more concerned with a career - a long-term approach that enables an individual to develop, move and progress effectively from job to job, to start their own business, or to work freelance and ultimately be successful in each role undertaken.

#### *An introduction to the USEM model and the SOAR model*

Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke are respected within the area of employability research. This is supported by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), who highlight that the USEM model of employability by Knight and Yorke (2004) is probably the most well-recognised and academically respected model within this area of work. The USEM model consists of four component parts:

1. **U**nderstanding
2. **S**kilful Practices
3. **E**fficacy Beliefs
4. **M**etacognition

Creation of this model was essentially motivated by the need to get academe to engage with the concept of employability. However, by defining employability using these four categories immediately raises the question of how the model might be applied on a daily basis by teaching staff. By attempting to appeal directly to academics, it inadvertently may have created a challenge for educators wishing to adopt the model and put it into practice, the problem being the relative complexity of

the four broad categories within the model and how each is potentially ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Attempting to take this interpretive approach one stage further within their own research, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) considered the various models of employability and their component elements, specifically in the context of working with students and graduates within HE in the UK. The foundation of their work for the Centre for Employability at the University of Central Lancashire is based on the DOTS model by Law and Watts (1977), frequently used within a career management and development context (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). DOTS consists of:

. . . planned experiences designed to facilitate the development of:

**Decision learning** – decision making skills

**Opportunity awareness** – knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are

**Transition learning** – including job searching and self-presenting skills

**Self-awareness** – in terms of interests, abilities, values, etc.

(Watts, 2006: 9-10, cited in Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007: 279)

The SOAR model from Kumar (2007) is also underpinned by DOTS. Both these models were developed with practical application in mind, supporting graduates into employment.

Anecdotally, the work of Knight and Yorke (2004) with the USEM model is considered to be academically robust, yet it is not necessarily considered to be of the most practical value for students or academics, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007). Yorke and Knight (2006a:7) themselves state, “Whilst the USEM model is useful as a way of thinking about how employability might be enhanced, it is too coarse-grained for analytical work on curricula”. Therefore, with a view to applying the USEM model in practice, Knight and Yorke went on to develop a list of thirty-nine components under each of the four categories, that would enable practitioners to thoroughly examine their



own practice using an employability lens. This list, developed for the *Skills Plus* project on behalf of the Higher Education Academy, was not intended to be exhaustive or applicable to all contexts, but as a starting point that institutions could adapt to meet their specific needs.

This expansion does, however, immediately raise the question of the total number of components. Thirty-nine is a relatively large number of factors to thoroughly and accurately consider if analysing a curriculum, and when trying to explain the concept to students, and could potentially cause confusion. This is not to say that all 39 components are not relevant and important, but working with this many components may have some inherent challenges. It could well be too many in terms of developing an understanding that staff and, in turn, students can engage with, and take beyond their time in HE as a concept to support their lifelong learning.

There was therefore a need for a more simplified and readily usable academic model and framework that could be used on a practical basis to effectively address the development of an individual's overall employability.

The DOTS model, although developed over thirty years previously, has been regularly reported as being used in practice, and was considered as a starting point by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) in their work, together with the USEM model.

As mentioned previously, Kumar (2007) also used the DOTS model in developing her own SOAR model, which was developed to support work with students on their personal, academic and career development in a HE setting.

McCash (2006), however, is critical of the DOTS model, suggesting that it lacks emphasis on other areas that may impact on an individual's success, beyond themselves and their immediate environment. Minten (2010), as previously cited, equally views external factors beyond the individual as being critical within an employability context. However, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) disagree with the findings of McCash (2006), suggesting that the simplicity of the DOTS model is the very reason for its use and overall popularity.

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007: 280) used the following definition of employability as the basis for their new framework: *The Key to Employability Model* or *Career Edge Model*.

Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.

Interestingly, they include an individual's personal satisfaction as a feature within their definition, which aligns with several other definitions on offer, such as the one from Yorke and Knight (2006a:3) and 'The Higher Education Academy' (n.d) which similarly suggests employability is:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

In this definition, satisfaction may not be stated explicitly, but could be implied in the words used 'which benefit themselves'. In addition, the definition offered by Hillage and Pollard (1998:2) includes 'keeping fulfilling work', which also indicates that an individual's satisfaction, is perhaps a common feature, when reflecting further:

In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.

Each of these definitions all clearly relate to the context of employment and the workplace, rather than being simply about the development of the individual and how they might be successful in all aspects of their lives. The desired outcome or original

purpose of these models could be argued as being somewhat narrow in this respect, as has been alluded to previously.

The importance of an individual being satisfied within their career has been highlighted here because how an individual, behaves, thinks and acts (their attitude) (Hillage and Pollard, 1998) within their work will potentially influence their overall performance and ultimate success. Kumar (2007) also stresses the importance of an individual focusing on careers that they *want* and are best suited for, as opposed to jobs they *can* do - this being a critical factor in relation to the motivation of an individual within their employment and long-term careers.

As mentioned previously, the definition from Hillage and Pollard (1998) raises the importance of the individual being able to demonstrate and apply knowledge, skills and appropriate attitudes within context. This presents an interesting challenge to those in HE in terms of how to embed activities within the curriculum that will help students develop the right attitude and be able to apply it in context. For example, in the case of this research and working in the sports industry, attitude is crucial and is most commonly developed through the relationships established with people across a range of contexts. Maintaining effective relationships with individuals clearly requires the ability to exhibit a variety of qualities and behaviours and perhaps even more so than Hillage and Pollard first suggested over a decade ago.

Collectively, these definitions highlight several critical features of employability, in that it is a dynamic, multi-faceted and importantly a long-term, ongoing concept, extending well beyond that first job or gaining an over-simplified set of skills. The overall complexity of employability is highlighted by Harvey (2003), cited in Kumar (2007:22), who describes employability as “a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher level learning”. This demonstrates the assertion in the previous chapter, that skills in isolation cannot fully encapsulate the complexities of employability, and perhaps more importantly, makes explicit the relationship between employability and learning. Skills clearly need to be demonstrated in a range of settings and environments, and therefore from this perspective context is certainly critical. Yet, anecdotal evidence from within HE often suggests that employability is seen as a list of skills to be developed in a kind of tick box exercise, simply seeking to capture evidence of their existence at a specific point in time, and within a particular

set of circumstances. However, what happens the following day, under different conditions and with different circumstances? Would the same individual demonstrate the skills as effectively and in the same way? Context here is crucial.

Further validating this view and the complex nature of employability as an area of work, Yorke and Knight (2006a:2) state:

Employability is, on the analysis presented here, considerably more complex than some proponents of 'core', 'key' and 'transferable' skills have suggested and is strongly aligned with the academic valuing of good learning.

This may go some way to easing concerns within the academic community that HE should not be about employability, but should be focused on subject specific knowledge and academic learning. York and Knight (2006a) contest that these two areas are very much compatible, and that the competencies desired in 'good students' are no different to those desired in good employees. Again, the relationship between employability and learning is made very clear. Cole and Hallett (2019) also highlight this relationship, suggesting the language of employability needs to be repositioned and effectively centred around learning in the future, rather than remaining anchored in gaining a set of skills simply for the purpose of securing that first destination job. Within this work by Cole and Hallett (2019), Cole (2019) introduces for the first time his *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy, which was developed as a direct result of this doctoral thesis. In this published work however, the taxonomy is not fully explained, and there is no rationale behind its development or detailed discussion of any of the elements within it. It is simply presented as a figure containing four specific dimensions for learning that are offered as an alternative way of framing the employability agenda. Deliberately being mindful of the importance of language to support stakeholder understanding and engagement, fundamentally it was developed to align with the conceptual models of employability, in particular the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004), Tomlinson (2017a). The conceptualisation of this taxonomy was informed by both the literature review within this thesis and the findings reported in Chapters 5 and 6. For the first time, *Dimensions for Learning* is discussed in detail in Chapters 7 and 8, as a direct response to the second of the research aims of this thesis, and as a unique contribution to the body of knowledge around employability.

Further exploring the related discourse, and although written about the financial and business services sector, the following quotation from the Financial Services Skills Council (2006) (cited in Kumar, 2007:23) illustrates the confusion that exists in terms of the language and terminology being used in the body of work on employability:

There is currently a wide disparity in interpretation and use of the 'language of skills' by different stakeholders, and a general lack of consensus on definitions for skills terminology...This lack of clarity confuses the messages being sent to potential graduate employees and to HEIs and makes it difficult to identify exactly what employers want...

While this confusion here is cited as existing in the financial and business services sector, there is no evidence to suggest that it should be less in any other sector, and the inherent issues around the use of the term *skills* is once again highlighted as being problematic (Cole and Hallett, 2019, Higdon, 2016, Yorke and Knight, 2006a).

Finally, and more recently, Tomlinson (2017a) has articulated employability in relation to a number of interrelated areas of *capital* that he views as essential to individuals in order to be successful, both in the context of the workplace and beyond. These capitals will be considered in the following section, where several of the theoretical models are compared in depth. Tomlinson's model was developed, like others, in response to the current skills-dominated discourse and in a direct attempt to shift general understanding into a more positive and constructive light.

### *Comparison of the theoretical models*

As already introduced in this chapter, there are several models within academic literature that have attempted to define the concept of employability and its related qualities and dispositions, skills, attitudes, behaviours, values and beliefs (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Hillage and Pollard, 1998, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Tomlinson, 2017a).

Due to this variety of definitions and associated models of employability, it is important to consider several in some depth, with the models chosen for this review being both

practical and, ultimately, deliverable. On this basis, four models were selected and will be discussed in more detail within this literature review.

Firstly, as already mentioned, Knight and Yorke are considered to be amongst some of the most eminent writers in this area of work (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Therefore, their USEM model of employability is the first under scrutiny. Secondly, the Key to Employability model or Career Edge model from Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) will be discussed. Importantly, this model was developed and presented by authors who acknowledge the work of Knight and Yorke. Both models feature within academic journals within the body of research. The third model for discussion within this chapter is that of Kumar (2007), who developed the SOAR model, which was published primarily for use by academics. Whilst not specifically a model of employability, it was developed to give practical insights into how to address academic, career and personal development with students in HE. SOAR provides a means to address the component features identified within the range of definitions and models of employability outlined previously. While the SOAR model is yet to be empirically tested within the academic literature, the underpinning theories used to develop it are well-established, and featuring it within this thesis may present an opportunity for future further research. The practical and applied nature of the model also further warrants its inclusion here.

Finally, the Graduate Capital model by Tomlinson (2017a) has been included as one of the newest models to be published within this field of study, and because of its specific use of language in seeking to move the associated discourse beyond a skills-focused lens.

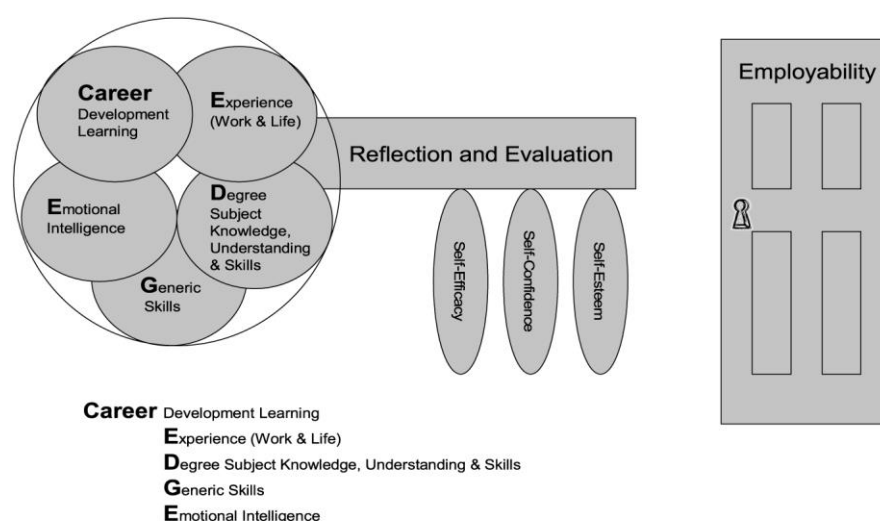
These four selected models present an interesting scenario, where each theoretical framework has both common features and key differences. With the applied nature of this research, both the Career Edge model and the SOAR model are well-suited, as both were designed to be of practical use with HE students in the classroom environment. Reviewing these two models alongside the academically acknowledged USEM model and the more recent conceptualisation of the Graduate Capital model, presents a pragmatic and contextually valuable basis for this thesis.

To add further value to this review, the Psycho-Social model of employability by Fugate et al. (2004) will also be referred to in the observations and reflections on these four main models.

### *Career Edge model*

The Key to Employability or Career Edge model was designed to be of practical use when working with both teachers and students. The following diagram outlines the component parts of this model, developed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007:281).

*Figure 2: Career Edge model, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007)*



### **CareerEDGE - The Key to Employability**

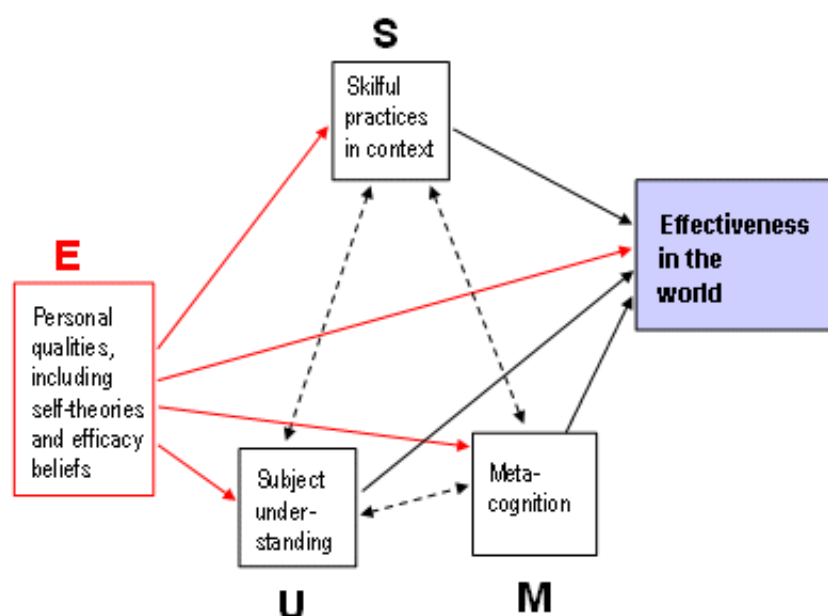
Each component within Career Edge is deemed to be essential, and each must be addressed in order to improve a student's overall employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). In which case, which of these elements are addressed within HE curriculums today, and specifically undergraduate sports programmes? On first reflection, there are some obvious areas that are clearly already being addressed. However, it is of concern that there are also elements that appear to be missing. *Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills* are all elements of this model that would be considered by most in academe to be the primary feature and overall purpose of HE and degree programmes. Some may also agree that *Experience (work and life)* is important. However, how many academics would not only agree, but actively then embed *Career Development Learning*, *Generic Skills* and *Emotional*

*Intelligence* within the curriculums and the pedagogies they employ? Chapters 5 and 6 respond to these questions.

### *The USEM model*

The next model to be examined is shown in Figure 3, which illustrates the components of the USEM model by Yoke and Knight (2004).

*Figure 3: The USEM model of employability, Yorke and Knight (2004)*



As mentioned previously, Yorke and Knight (2006a:8) explain this model in practical terms by specifying thirty-nine aspects of employability, broadly split into three types: personal qualities, core skills and process skills. For the purpose of this research, which seeks to identify current understanding and specific interpretations of employability in HE, personal qualities are of particular interest here, and are defined by the authors as:

1. Malleable self-theory: belief that attributes (e.g. intelligence) are not fixed and can be developed.
2. Self-awareness: awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values.



3. Self-confidence: confidence in dealing with the challenges that employment and life throw up.
4. Independence: ability to work without supervision.
5. Emotional intelligence: sensitivity to others' emotions and the effects that they can have.
6. Adaptability: ability to respond positively to changing circumstances and new challenges.
7. Stress tolerance: ability to retain effectiveness under pressure.
8. Initiative: ability to take action unprompted.
9. Willingness to learn: commitment to on-going learning to meet the needs of employment and life.
10. Reflectiveness: the disposition to reflect evaluatively on the performance of oneself and others.

Yorke and Knight (2006a:8)

There are certainly relationships and overlap between several of these qualities. For example, emotional intelligence relates to self-awareness and an ability to reflect. In addition, the qualities listed are either explicitly referenced within, or can be directly associated with elements of, the SOAR model, Graduate Capital model, Career Edge model and the Psycho-Social model. This immediately demonstrates a number of similarities.

Yorke and Knight (2006a) go on to comment on the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements first discussed in the previous chapter in relation to sport, suggesting that more thought needs to be given to how the qualities highlighted may be developed in students, beyond subject-specific knowledge, and that the pedagogies employed within HE should be considerate of methods conducive to the development of the student's abilities in such areas. Although this was written thirteen years ago, it is unlikely that many programmes since have addressed in practice the issues highlighted under *Personal Qualities* (Knight and Yorke, 2006a).

The multi-faceted nature of employability is evident from the models by Knight and Yorke (2004) and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) presented, and the relationship and

connections between each of the component parts begins to emerge. There are clearly similarities between both models, as outlined in the following table.

*Table 1: Comparison of USEM and Career Edge*

<b>USEM Model (Knight and Yorke 2004)</b>	<b>Career Edge Model (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007) similarities</b>
'U' in USEM - <b>U</b> nderstanding	Degree Subject Knowledge, Understanding and Skills
'S' in USEM - <b>S</b> kilful practices in context	Experience Work / Life and Generic Skills
'E' in USEM – Personal Qualities, <b>E</b> fficacy beliefs and self-theories	Self-Efficacy, Self Confidence / Self Esteem and Emotional Intelligence
'M' in USEM - <b>M</b> eta-cognition – “Encompassing self-awareness regarding the students learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action”, (Yorke and Knight, 2006a:5)	Reflection and Evaluation

The final component of *Career Development Learning* from the *Career Edge model* does appear on the surface, at least, to go beyond the boundaries of the USEM model, although Yorke and Knight (2006a:7) also recognise the contribution of co-curricular activities, such as career development, in the supporting text of their research.

It is also important to note that there are areas of overlap between the component parts of *Career Edge model* themselves (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007:280):

...for example, in addition to work experience being a valuable part of career development learning, it may in some cases directly inform subject learning relevant to the degree course being studied.

Fugate et al. (2004) discuss the direct relationships and overlap between the dimensions within their model, too. Collectively, these overlaps once more highlight the relative complexity of defining this area of work.

### *SOAR model*

The third conceptual model under review within this research is the SOAR model (**S**elf, **O**pportunities, **A**spirations and **R**esults) by Kumar (2007). This model is discussed here due to it being relatively untested within the academic literature, and because - as an approach in practice - it encompasses much of what is core to the other academic models of employability presented.

The links between theory and practice have been identified as largely lacking in the employability literature reviewed to date. More emphasis seems to have been placed on defining key terms, rather than considering the practical application of the theory to practice, both at a strategic and pedagogical level, hence the value of exploring this particular model once again and in a little more depth.

As highlighted earlier, Kumar (2007) developed the SOAR model based on an interpretation of the DOTS or new DOTS model by Law and Watts (1977), which are careers management models commonly used by those in careers services. Kumar attempted to reorganise the elements of these models into a more logical order, and in such a way that the students using the model could follow each of the four stages in sequence, in order to develop across a range of areas. The four stages of DOTS have been outlined previously. Kumar believes that key to both the SOAR and DOTS models is the relationship between the *Self* and *Opportunity* stages, and the relationship that the *self* has in interacting with the environment and the opportunities that potentially exist within it.

Kumar (2007) attempted to develop the SOAR model based on theory from several areas, and in such a way that it became a more practical and readily usable tool in the classroom with students. The SOAR model inherently takes a positive stance in its positioning, through its structure, and through the terminology associated with it. This is the opposite of what may be perceived to be a slightly more negative approach adopted in models such as the SWOT analysis, where individuals are considering weaknesses and threats. SOAR, **S**elf, **O**pportunities, **A**spirations and **R**esults focuses very much on the positives, even if this is merely in terms of the language used.

The following sections detail the features of each of the sections of the SOAR model and then explores its connections to the other three models of employability presented.

#### SOAR model: self-awareness

According to Kumar (2007), Self-awareness skills are an important means by which students can reflect, identify, analyse, personalise and make better use of any other particular skill. This being the case, the importance of self-awareness is highlighted as acting as the key to successfully utilising a wider range of other skills and qualities that are equally critical for employability. Being aware of strengths and limitations will also influence overall self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, which have collectively been referred to as the glue that holds all the other elements together (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). This may again be linked back to the *Reflection and Evaluation* component of the work by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), the *Metacognition* and *Efficacy beliefs* components of the USEM model from Knight and Yorke (2004) and the *Identity Capital* component from Tomlinson (2017a) and Fugate et al. (2004).

These areas are all relevant to the nature of working in the sports industry, which requires an ability to interact with people both internal and external to the organisation. If employees have poor self-awareness, then trying to establish, build and maximise relationships will be extremely difficult, and as a result, the overall effectiveness of their work may be limited. Making further connections between self-awareness and emotional intelligence, an area which will be discussed in more detail later, Rozell et al. (2002:275) state that “Self-awareness according to Goleman (1996) is the keystone of emotional intelligence”. However, self-awareness is only part of the challenge in this area of work. The concept of social awareness is also raised by Goleman (1996) and Tomlinson (2017a), as a feature of *Social Capital*, therefore both areas require further consideration.

#### SOAR model: opportunity awareness

According to Kumar (2007:27) “‘Opportunity-awareness’ engages ‘self’ with the world of opportunity, which provides external reference points for self-appraisal”. In other words, this is about understanding how an individual can interact and relate to opportunities that exist; for example, how a sports management undergraduate could

relate to the current sports job market by being aware of where to find these types of jobs, knowing what the jobs require and understanding how they personally align in relation to these requirements. Relative to the three other models under discussion here, this may be seen to relate to the *Career Development Learning and Experience (work and life)* components of the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), and the *Understanding* and *Skilful practices* components of the USEM model by Knight and Yorke (2004), finally linking to *Social and Cultural Capital* by Tomlinson (2017a).

As already stated, key to the work by Kumar (2007) is the relationship between *self* and *opportunities*. To be successful, these areas need to be considered in sequence and a logical order. In the case of this thesis, for a sports undergraduate student to fully understand the opportunities that exist in the sports industry, they first need to develop their own self-awareness, considering their own individual strengths, motivations, abilities and personality, this will potentially then pave the way to several types of job roles. This also aligns with the concept of *Career Identity* highlighted by Fugate et al. (2004) in their model and therefore the corresponding need for the individual to define their wider identity more broadly first. For example, if a student is aware that they are very shy, not very strong at public speaking and not confident in talking to new people, then perhaps a Sports Development Officer role that requires all these abilities may not be appropriate. However, if this same student has good self-awareness, then perhaps knowing the requirements of this same job may lead them to seek ways to develop in the areas required, so that they might consider this kind of opportunity in the future. This point highlights the dynamic nature of the SOAR model. This interaction cannot occur simply as a static snapshot or viewed in isolation, it must be viewed as a journey, or lifelong and more fluid process that is reviewed and revisited throughout an individual's career.

#### SOAR model: aspirations

This leads to the third stage of Kumar's (2007:28) model, which is described as:

The process of forming achievable aspirations and making decisions should interconnect 'self-awareness' with 'opportunity-awareness' and lead to appropriate choices and actions.

This dynamic process is cyclical (see Figure 4) and should be constantly revisited. From the initial interplay between the *self* and *opportunities*, the individual should then form realistic and appropriate aspirations, goals that they wish to achieve.

### SOAR model: results

The final stage of Kumar's (2007) model is concerned with the results of the aspirations that have been formed. Ultimately, the results are where the individual "... draws on all the previous elements, and also the student's understanding of how his or her 'profile' might transfer from one context to another." Kumar (2007:29). This highlights the issue of transferability, and how it is essential that any student entering the world of employment or wanting to progress in it must consider how their qualities and skills may give them potential value in other jobs and roles.

One of the main strengths of the SOAR model is that it can be applied across any subject discipline. This is due to the key features of the model, which allow those working with it to apply it in their own contexts, making it specific to their own needs and characteristics. In this way, its application is very much a personalised process and individualised journey. This may be viewed as advantageous at a strategic level, where institutions may adopt the model at scale, thus contributing to a more consistent approach to personal, academic and career development. The University of Bedfordshire, where Kumar was previously employed, did apply this model in practice.

Figure 4: SOAR as a cyclical, development process, Kumar (2007)

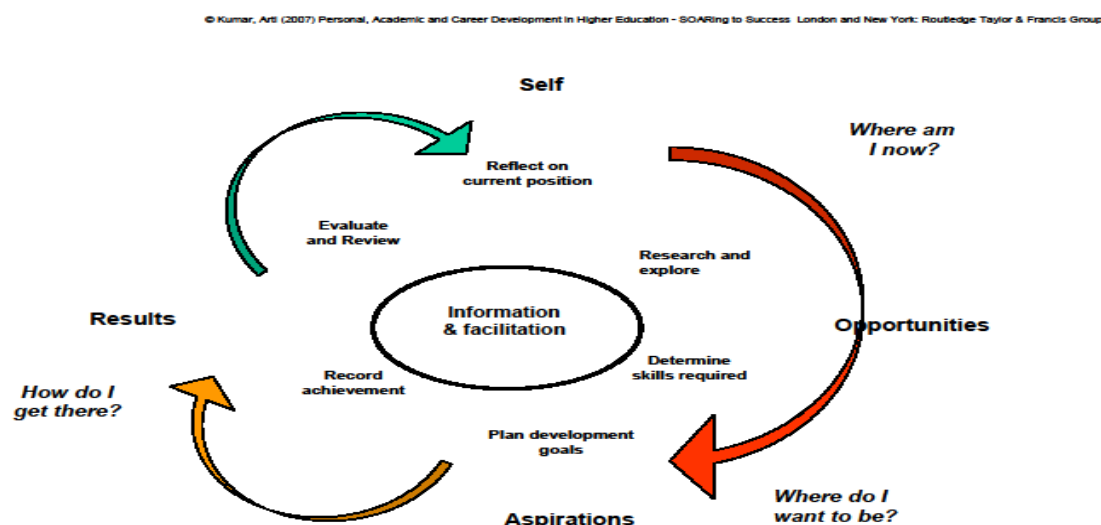


Figure 4 illustrates that this is not a simple linear model, but is cyclical, with overlap and interaction between the different stages. This makes it important to consider the process as a whole and in a logical sequence, not simply the individual stages in isolation.

### *Graduate Capital model*

More recently Tomlinson (2017a:339) has sought to define employability slightly differently, and:

.....conceptualises graduate employability as largely constitutive of the accumulation and deployment of a variety of interactive forms of capital. Capitals are defined here as key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates. These resources encompass a range of educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions and are acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences..... The main forms of capital which are integral to this approach are: human, social, cultural, identity and psychological.

Of particular note in this interpretation is the inclusion of factors that stretch the narrative beyond that of employment only, and include *social and cultural dimensions*

that may impact more broadly across an individual's life. Tomlinson also states that capitals may be developed by students through both *formal and informal experiences*, which aligns conceptually with the work of Barnett (2011) and Jackson (2008) on Lifewide learning, recognising the full extent of learning that takes place simultaneously across multiple spaces, not only in the classroom and formal environments.

Tomlinson (2017a:339) goes on to explain this model further, suggesting:

...this paper offers a more integrated approach; it also shows that whilst each of these components relate to different properties, they overlap to some degree and their boundaries are fairly fluid. More significantly, this paper offers an alternative vocabulary to understanding graduate employability, its development in HE and in graduates' transition to the labour market.

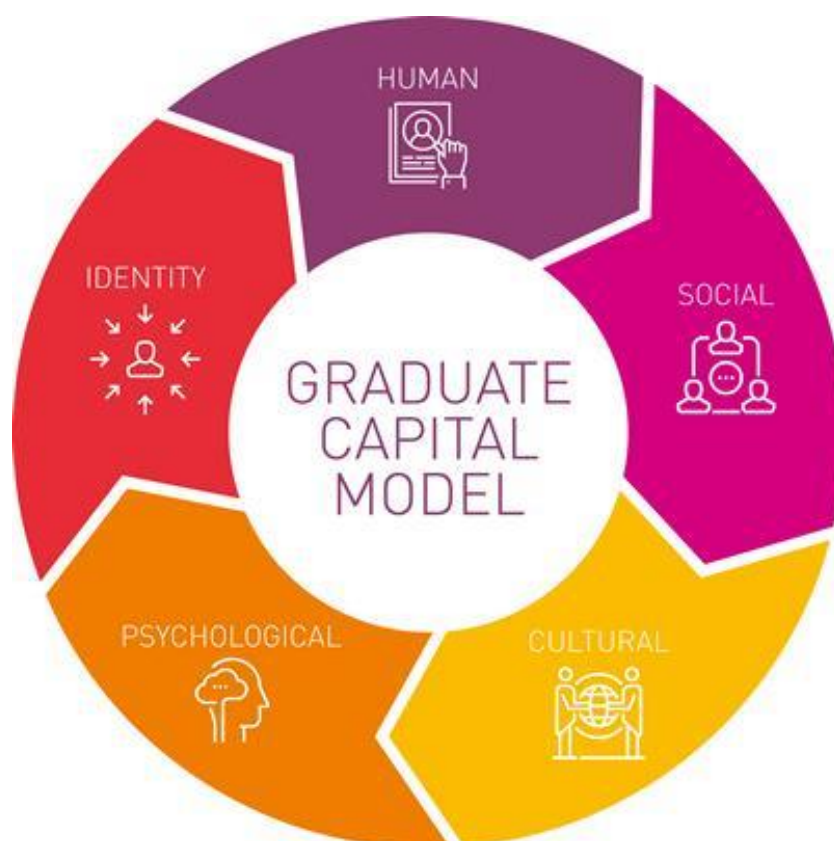
Tomlinson (2017a) goes on to define each of the capitals within his model and explicitly highlights the value of each in supporting graduates for the workplace and employment. The notion of fluidity is also discussed by Barnett (2011). As Jackson (2008) and Scott (2016b) highlight - with a focus on preparing students for a *complex world*, it would seem appropriate that the learning opportunities created reflect this fluidity and complexity, in order to best prepare students for life and employment post-graduation. Perhaps most importantly, Tomlinson (2017a) highlights the importance of understanding, interpretation and ultimately the discourse relating to employability, and the need to reposition the employability agenda to more accurately reflect the features that are most critical to all graduates. Consideration of current understanding and interpretations of employability and the resulting discourse associated with employability is the focus of this thesis and therefore the work of Tomlinson adds credibility to this doctoral research.

However, in his paper, Tomlinson (2017a) offers no real practical solution to how his model might be embedded in practice across an entire institution. Using research to inform strategic and practical approaches to employability is not currently happening and this clearly requires further consideration. In this respect, Cole and Tibby (2013) are two of the only authors to consider and write about both strategic and research informed approaches to employability to date.



Tomlinson (2017a) goes on to define each of the capitals within his conceptual model, which builds on the earlier work of Fugate et al. (2004), who also included both human and social capital in their Psycho-Social model of employability.

Figure 5: The Graduate Capital model, Tomlinson (2017b)



### Human capital

Tomlinson (2017a:341) defines *human capital* as follows:

Human capital – knowledge, skills and future performance. Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills which graduates acquire which are a foundation of their labour market outcomes. This form of capital bears the closest relation to skills approaches given that it is concerned with what and how graduates can make connections between their formal education and future employment outcomes.

Clearly, this resonates with the work of Fugate et al. (2004), the *Understanding* and *Skilful Practices* elements of the USEM model by Knight and Yorke (2004) and the

*Degree Subject Knowledge Understanding and Skills* and the *Generic Skills* elements of the Career Edge model from Dacre Pool and Sewel (2007). Implicitly, this could also be seen to align with the *self*-element of the SOAR model by Kumar (2007), which includes self-awareness as a key feature. Here, it is important that the student is able to recognise and articulate the skills and knowledge they possess in the context of situations such as job interviews.

### Social capital

Once more aligning with the work of Fugate et al. (2004), Tomlinson (2017a:342) defines *social capital* as:

... networks and human relationships. Social capital in relation to graduate employability can be understood as the sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates' existing human capital and bring them closer to the labour market and its opportunity structures. Social capital can shape and facilitate graduates' access and awareness of labour market opportunities and then being able to exploit them.

With clear connections being made to the workplace, human capital could be said to align with the *Experience (work and life)* element of the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), where this would involve developing an individual's personal network and the relationships that underpin it. This could also be seen to align with the *aspirations* stage of the SOAR model from Kumar (2007), where the student focuses on taking actions and gaining experiences in order to address the qualities and dispositions to match the types of roles they are seeking.

### Cultural capital

Here, Tomlinson (2017a: 343) states:

Cultural capital: employability and cultural synergy and alignment Cultural capital can be conceived as the formation of culturally valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter.

Clear links to employment are once more apparent with cultural capital, although, importantly, Tomlinson makes explicit the need to consider dispositions and behaviours, helpfully moving the discourse associated with employability beyond knowledge alone.

### Identity capital

Tomlinson (2017a:343) defines *identity capital* as:

... self-concept and personal narratives. Identity capital is defined here as the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability. This also extends to their abilities to draw on experiences and articulate a personal narrative which aligns to the employment domains they seek to enter.

Once more, we see an alignment with *career development learning* from Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and *Career Identity* by Fugate et al. (2004), the *self* and *opportunities* stages of SOAR by Kumar (2007) and *efficacy beliefs* as an element of USEM by Knight and Yorke (2004). This shows essentially strong similarities across all four models. While Tomlinson (2017a) refers to the value of graduate capitals beyond the workplace, the definitions he offers align very specifically with preparation for the workplace.

### Psychological capital

Finally, Tomlinson (2017a:345) defines psychological capital as being concerned with:

... resilience and career adaptability. Psychological capital is a potentially significant form of capital as it is based on the psychosocial resources which enable graduates to adapt and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges.

In a similar way to the other graduate capitals defined by Tomlinson, important human qualities are highlighted beyond knowledge and generic skills-related areas, such as resilience, adaptability and responding to change. Whilst these are areas about which there may be valid concerns, due to their likely absence in the curriculum, they are

also only specifically offered here in relation to employment and securing a job, which could be considered as unnecessarily narrow. The risk is that by closely aligning skills with employment individuals then associate their value as residing solely within that context, rather than being a quality that holds greater value across multiple spaces in their lives. This misses the opportunity to recognise the potential added value, and perhaps subsequent engagement and traction across multiple fronts, by limiting it to just the one narrow context of work.

### *Lifelong learning*

Within the four models introduced, there are numerous commonalities, as has been discussed. The ongoing, long term nature of employability has been highlighted as a critical distinction and contradiction to the apparent national obsession with the first destination data and resulting league tables that only present static snapshots in time. This signals the relevance of *lifelong learning*, which is highlighted in the work of O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005:438), who state that:

An important goal of education that has moved to centre stage in our global knowledge economies is the goal of developing individuals who are capable of learning where learning is viewed as a continuous lifelong process.

This long-term view is one that is central to the concept of employability; this was previously highlighted by the UK Government and former Department of Education and Employment who announced at the time:

...that we must now live in a “learning age” (Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1998) in which it will be the norm to engage in retraining and personal development throughout the working life.

(cited in Fallows and Steven, 2000:76)

While some departments of the British Government recognise the ongoing nature of learning, others focus on the short term, using static measures of success that put emphasis on learning to support first destination outcomes.

Although originally written over twenty years ago, these sentiments were echoed by Kumar (2007:152), who states:

In today's less supported and competitive environment (at university and in the workplace) it is imperative for everyone to take responsibility for their learning, and work towards achieving the status of independent, mature, lifelong learning.

Extending this to the present day, it could be argued this is still relevant. In fact, it may be suggested that perhaps has recently become even more important for the current and future workforce, as competition for jobs becomes more intense. In considering who should take responsibility in this age of lifelong learning, O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005:442) state that:

Individuals need to take responsibility for their own personal development, take ownership of their own employability and view their career in terms of wider employability across industries and sectors.

This demonstrates the importance of employees ensuring that they are adaptable and flexible, and able to develop to meet the demands of new opportunities as they are presented throughout their careers. In further support of O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005) and in relation to the need for the individual to be able to adapt to new environments, Currie et al. (2006) (cited in Clarke and Patrickson, 2008:125) stated:

According to the proponents of the boundaryless career, individuals must now develop strategies for managing careers and employability across jobs and organisations rather than relying on internal organisational career ladders.

It is important to consider here, the possible causes for the shift in responsibility for personal and career development or 'employability'. Brown et al. (2002), suggest that it may be that employers have encouraged individuals to take more responsibility for their own employability and lifelong learning. This would allow employers more flexibility in terms of hiring part-time or casual staff, while potentially saving money in the long-term. Within the current financial climate, this shift in responsibility from the company to the individual has become more pronounced. Linked to this concept, the

ability of an individual to adapt, be flexible and develop to be effective within a range of different jobs is sometimes referred to as a 'Protean Career' (Hall, 1996), which is led by the individual themselves, not by any company or organisation. Adopting a protean career approach addresses the employability of an individual, as they continually seek to develop the qualities and capabilities to match the demands of the various roles available.

Unfortunately, in summary, O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005) believe that the education systems of most developed countries have failed to establish the environments conducive to individuals embracing lifelong learning. This reported shortcoming becomes an even more important consideration when coupled with the fact that employers' views of graduates are mixed and can, at times, be quite negative (Knight and Yorke, 2004, Kogan, 1985 cited in Ramsden, 1992, Minten, 2010 and Pitchford cited in Collins, 2010). If, for a number of years, education has not been nurturing an environment conducive to developing lifelong learners, while HE has reportedly been addressing the employability agenda, the compounded results do not look positive.

The concept of Lifewide learning (Jackson, 2008) may be revisited, here, including learning that is simultaneously happening across multiple spaces. Viewing learning more holistically through a lifewide lens would ensure that the individual could recognise, maximise and capture much greater value across all learning experiences, such as playing sport, volunteering or simply in their daily interactions with family and friends. To ignore the possibility of learning outside the formal environment means missing significant opportunities, particularly when considering that the kinds of qualities and dispositions that have been discussed in these two literature review chapters might best be developed and nurtured precisely through such informal learning spaces and experiences.

### *Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence*

*The Pedagogy for Employability Group* (2006:4), explored the future needs of employers, stating that:

Given that (within the UK at least) analyses of graduate job vacancies show that the majority of such jobs are open to graduates from any discipline, the emphasis on possession of high-level generic skills and personal attributes is well founded.

In a bid to identify and articulate this range of *generic skills and personal attributes* desired by industry, The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2006:4) conducted research which was intended to be fed back to academia to help inform future teaching practices. Their results yielded a list of attributes which employers suggested that graduates should be capable of demonstrating:

1. Imagination/creativity
2. Adaptability/flexibility
3. Willingness to learn
4. Independent working/autonomy
5. Working in a team
6. Ability to manager others
7. Ability to work under pressure
8. Good oral communication
9. Communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences
10. Numeracy
11. Attention to detail
12. Time management
13. Assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
14. Planning, co-ordinating and organising ability

For the purpose of this research, and in terms of seeking to identify common and key features that span several of the models of employability available in the literature, points three to six are of particular interest. These *attributes* can clearly be linked to areas such as *self-awareness* and *social awareness* (Kumar, 2007), *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 1996) *emotional and social competencies* (Boyatzis and Saatchioglu, 2008) and *interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence* (Gardner, 1999), all of which feature explicitly, or can be linked to, the models of employability presented

within this chapter, including those personal qualities outlined by Knight and Yorke (2004).

Considering the components of employability and their relevance to specific industry sectors, Maguire and Hogan (2004) conducted research in Ireland, seeking to identify the specific skills and competencies required in terms of employability for the next generation. Although related to the manufacturing industry, their findings have clear links with the models of employability previously discussed. Maguire and Hogan (2004:7) classified competencies according to four key headings:

- Interpersonal skills required to work effectively with others
- Intrapersonal attitudes, beliefs, values, confidence inherent in the individual
- Business understanding the mechanics of the organization
- Technical acquired core skills relevant to a particular area within an organization

The first two points listed above, *Interpersonal skills* and *Intrapersonal attitudes, beliefs and values* are of particular interest to this research. Also supporting these findings, Rozell et al. (2002:272) stated:

...other types of intelligence such as interpersonal (one's adeptness at handling interpersonal relationships) and intrapersonal skills (the ability to manage one's own emotions) are equally, if not more important, in predicting success in the academic area and the workplace (Goleman, 1995, 1998: Sternberg, 1996)

Further supporting this view, "The abilities to know what is going on in a social setting and to set the correct emotional tone for it are crucial life-outcome criteria," (McClelland, 1973:10). Although written some time ago, this is clearly relevant to this research and the sports industry today, where relationships with people have been highlighted as being essential. The nature of working in sports requires close interaction with diverse populations and communities, where people's behaviours, expectations and attitudes can be complex and unpredictable. To further illustrate this point McClelland (1973:11) states "...life is simply not that structured, and often does not permit one to choose between defined-in-advance responses". When dealing with



people face-to-face it is important to be able to respond in accordance with the behaviour of another. While it is certainly possible to gain experience of dealing with different people in various situations and environments, the possible number of such combinations is endless. When discussing the needs of industry, and the demand for graduates who have the right personal characteristics first and foremost, Yorke (2006:5) states:

This is consistent with the views of Reich (1991, 2002). In his more recent work, he argued that advanced economies need two sorts of high-level expertise: one emphasizing discovery and the other focusing on exploiting the discoveries of others through market-related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills.

The importance of interpersonal skills is highlighted here. Clearly interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence and related competencies, first written about by Gardner (1983), can be seen to link to the later work of Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Goleman (1996) with emotional intelligence. Self-awareness and social awareness are the two other terms used in this area of work, and are also important in relation to an individual's personal, academic and career development as stated by Kumar (2007) and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007).

Cumulatively, the value of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence is made clear and should be considered as a feature of any future approaches to employability (Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008, Cole, 2019, cited in Cole and Hallett, 2019, Gardner, 1983, 1999 and 2003, Goleman, 1996 and 1998, Kumar, 2007, Maguire and Hogan, 2004, Mayer and Salovey, 1997, McClelland, 1973, Rozell et al. 2002, and Yorke, 2006).

To then consider the development of these associated areas of learning within education is complex. These areas will not commonly be made explicit with students, or assessed, as - by their very nature - seeking to quantify them is more challenging than assessing knowledge alone. There are tests that can be used to assess these capabilities, but these may not be readily available within the wider HE setting. The expertise to make practical use of such tools may not exist, either. However, none of this should prevent all students at least being made aware of the importance of this

broader range of capabilities and the associated areas of learning in supporting their development, Cole (2019) cited in Cole and Hallett (2019).

### *Competencies*

Boyatzis (1982) raises an important consideration at this stage, highlighting the inherent differences in the views and use of terminology in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Boyatzis (1982) places emphasis on the competencies of individuals in the workplace and on the behavioural characteristics needed for effective performance. This is known as the *American approach*. However, the *British approach* focuses on minimum standards related to the performance outcomes which can be demonstrated by an individual (Fletcher, 1991, cited in O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005:441 and Horton, 2002).

The British approach was evidenced through the work of Skills Active, and the organisation's development and use of the National Occupational Standards for the sport and leisure industry. These standards clearly state desired outcomes of performance in specific roles within the sports sector. The British approach could be viewed as being mechanistic, taking the human factor out of the equation and focusing on specific actions and desired outcomes within any given job role and function. This could be problematic, particularly in areas of work which depend on human interactions at a personal level to be effective. Common sense would therefore suggest that in England, and relating back to this research, more emphasis is needed on behavioural characteristics, as highlighted within the American approach. Suggesting overall that a position that considers the combination of both American and British approaches is preferential (O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005). This proposed position has clear ramifications for the associated education systems. How might the HE sector seek to address the development of these more diverse learning outcomes, assuming that they are even recognised and accepted as being an HE responsibility?

As discussed previously, Minten (2010) adopts a slightly different view to the apparent issues with sports graduates not meeting industry expectations, placing an emphasis on employers needing to understand and better utilise graduate competencies and capabilities. However, there is a real danger of shifting the focus away from the

individual themselves, considering the considerable research (Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Gardner, 1983, 1999 and 2003, Hillage and Pollard, 1998, Knight and Yorke, 2002, 2004, Kumar, 2007, Mayer and Salovey, 1997, Sternberg et al., 2000, Tomlinson, 2017a, Yorke 2006 and Yorke and Knight, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) which has sought to define the qualities, dispositions, skills, attitudes and behaviours an individual requires in order to be successful in a range of employment situations and having inherent value in life more broadly. Within education and through the daily contact and practice employed with students, there is an opportunity for HE professionals to work with individuals to address and develop across all these areas, but to do so requires that these areas of learning be made explicit from the outset. This is the critical first stage: raising awareness with both the academic community and students, before the focus on understanding, and ultimately development, even becomes a possibility.

### *Subject knowledge v competencies*

The purpose of HE has been discussed in Chapter 2. Emerging from this and the literature highlighted in this chapter, one of the central issues is the importance of focusing on learning for the development of competencies, or qualities, dispositions and behaviours, in addition to subject-specific knowledge. This is supported by the view that “It is only a minority of graduates who are able to gain employment which directly utilises the academic content of their higher education curriculum”, Higher Education Statistics Agency (1998b), cited in Fallows and Steven (2000:75) and AGR (2016). Therefore, for an individual to be successful in any given occupation, they will require an ability to use their existing knowledge and abilities and apply them in a range of contexts. As mentioned before, these abilities are often referred to as competencies, which Boyatzis (1982), cited in Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008:93) defined as, “the underlying characteristics of a person that lead to or cause effective and outstanding performance”. An alternative definition that delves somewhat deeper is provided by O’Donoghue and Maguire (2005:441), who state:

A competency is a skill or function, and it includes the underlying knowledge and ability necessary for its performance. Competence on the other hand is broader: it represents the totality of knowledge, skills and abilities (or

competencies) necessary for professional practice; and implies a minimum level of proficiency or threshold in performance.

Key within this definition, and in relation to the need for more than supporting knowledge, is the 'ability necessary for its performance'. This again highlights the importance of other supportive areas, such as social and emotional competencies, which allow an individual to effectively complete a task or function in different environments and situations, and with different people. This is supported by the research by Minten (2010:72), who found that:

The graduates' performance tended to be attributed to their personality and a clear pattern of strengths emerged across them: good interpersonal skill, initiative, a positive attitude, ability to work hard, commitment and having past relevant experiences.

This flags, once more, the importance of student learning including more than just the acquisition of subject knowledge. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (n.d). also supports this view. Collectively, therefore, there exists some level of agreement of what is important to consider within education and learning from both an academic and industry perspective, yet this is not a view shared by all.

Following this theme, earlier research by Boyatzis, 1982, Bray et al., 1974, Howard and Bray, 1988, Kotter, 1982, Luthans et. al., 1988, Thornton and Byham, 1982, (cited in Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008:93) found several competencies that have been directly linked to outstanding performance in the workplace. They suggest that these:

...tend to include abilities from three clusters:

1. Cognitive intelligence competencies, such as systems thinking;
2. Emotional intelligence competencies, or intrapersonal abilities, such as adaptability; and
3. Social intelligence competencies, or interpersonal abilities, such as networking.

The work of Boyatzis sought to build on the earlier work of Goleman (1996) striving to apply this area of research directly to the workplace, and potentially answer some of the critics of Goleman's work, who have questioned its value and validity, Meyer and

Fletcher (2007). Boyatzis sought to develop this work to a stage where it could be tested empirically, as demonstrated by his development of the creation of the 'Emotional and Social Competency Inventory' (ESCI), Boyatzis (n.d). Whilst this work was conducted in the US, parallels may be drawn with the UK, considering the internationally transferrable nature of good management and leadership principles. The three clusters of abilities listed above highlight very clearly the importance of HE, and - at the very least – both students and academics being aware of the factors which have been identified as important to employers in the workplace. Such factors are ultimately considered to be those which contribute to the attributes of more successful and effective employees.

In highlighting the high level of attention that emotional intelligence (EI) had received in education, Lopes et al. (2004:1018) stated:

The idea that emotional competencies are crucial for adaptation in various realms of life has fuelled interest in the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) and inspired numerous programs of social and emotional learning in school and work settings.

This study was conducted in the US and Germany, and demonstrated an interest and the potential relevance of the application of EI research outside the US, where much of the literature emanates from. Clearly, there is a high level of interest in research into EI and its applications in the US; Boyatzis and Saatchioglu (2008), Goleman (1996) and (1998), Mayer and Salovey (1997), being amongst some of the main contributors to this field of study.

It could be suggested that there are parallels between the US research on competencies and the work in employability being conducted in the UK. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), who are based in the UK, explicitly include emotional intelligence as an essential aspect to address as part of supporting a student's overall employability. Gardner (1983) developed the concept of *multiple intelligences*, which included both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences as two clear areas, where individuals may possess specific abilities. Both these intelligences clearly relate to the ability to work effectively with other people, to have good self-awareness, and an ability to reflect on one's own behaviours and actions. Reflection and self-awareness are two

areas previously cited in the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Kumar (2007).

Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008:94) proceeded to go one stage further in their research, stating that individuals require an actual desire and motivation to use their talents:

These three domains of capability or talent (i.e. knowledge, competencies, and motivational drivers) help us to understand what a person can do (i.e. knowledge), how a person can do it (i.e. competencies), and why a person feels the need to do it (i.e. values, motives, and unconscious dispositions).

This is a very clear way of considering the constituent elements that contribute towards an individual's performance in the workplace and beyond. Could these same factors be with undergraduates in an HE setting? Here the opportunity exists to support and nurture much more than just knowledge, and - with the appropriate curriculum - there is an opportunity to teach how an individual might apply such knowledge, for example through problem-based learning, or work-related learning opportunities, as well as critically reflecting on why there is a need to do this at all, as suggested by Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008). These motivational drivers, or how students seek to define and develop their own personal values, motives and dispositions, is one of the most challenging domains of capability. This is something that may be considered as a long-term process, requiring support and guidance from suitable teaching staff, in the appropriate manner, and at the most effective stage in relation to the student's overall development. Kumar (2007) makes specific reference to this consideration of selecting appropriate timing for action in the *Self* stage of her SOAR model. Specifically, the student's level of emotional and overall maturity, which should increase with age. The personal relationships between the teaching members of staff and the students in this regard is a critical factors to consider here, their ability to communicate effectively together and how the academic delivers their sessions with the students in the classroom will all be key.

As discussed previously, the work of Skills Active and now CIMSPA has been directed towards promoting the use of National Occupational Standards, which outline the specific and minimum standards of performance expected in the workplace. However, how much these standards truly focus on the kinds of qualities raised in the previous

sections is questionable, with *knowledge* and *skills* dominating the standards and the *behaviours* section specifically, largely being positioned much less prominently. Therefore, any learning opportunities based explicitly on these standards may prove to be of limited value, unless much more emphasis is placed on the development of the behavioural abilities of individuals, which in turn, also often happen to be the very areas of concern that employers have expressed (Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Minten, 2010). Knight and Yorke (2004) summarise this very well when discussing the position at the time of their research, with many employers criticising graduates who lack understanding of the real world and the business environment, and how this then limits their ability to operate effectively from the outset of their employment. In simple terms, this is very much concerned with *how* to do something and not only focusing on *what* to do in terms of knowledge alone.

This aligns with the work of Sternberg et al. (2000), who define the concepts of *practical intelligence and tacit knowledge*. Sternberg et al. (2000: xiii) highlight the importance of practical intelligence as follows:

...our argument is that academic intelligence is not enough and that successful prediction and, more importantly, understanding of performance in the everyday world require assessment of practical as well as academic intelligence.

This is a concept that may be suggested to have not been fully embraced within HE, (Fearn, 2008). Similarly, the work of Pitchford cited in Collins (2010), specifically highlighted that the sports development sector contained a high percentage of graduates, yet clearly standards were still perceived as dropping. If the sports development workforce has never been so qualified, what is the reason for this apparent decline in standards? It raises the question of whether undergraduate sports programmes are focusing learning opportunities on the most effective areas?

Fundamental to the concept of practical intelligence is *tacit knowledge*, which Sternberg et al. (2000: ix) define as:

The procedural knowledge one learns in everyday life that is usually not taught and often is not even verbalized. Tacit knowledge includes things like knowing

what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect.

Through their research, Sternberg et al. go on to suggest that employees who were able to acquire and then apply their tacit knowledge were subsequently more effective. However, the ability to acquire the tacit knowledge was dependant on experience gained within the relevant environment, Sternberg et al. (2000). For undergraduates to acquiring tacit knowledge of the sports industry, this would suggest that students should gain direct experience in that environment. Work-related learning and work placements may be methods for gaining this experience, however the question of the quality and relevance of what the student is exposed to is important, and in particular how representative it would be in relation to the genuine job function and role they seek to learn more about.

Once again, this highlights the apparent gap between the US and UK in relation to the application of knowledge gained through research in the field of applied psychology. Clearly there are issues to be addressed in the UK in terms of standards of performance in the workplace, yet research already exists that offers potential solutions to tackle these very issues. Practical use of this research appears to be limited and certainly a praxis between the two does not appear to be commonplace, in the same way that there is very limited evidence in the literature of conceptual models of employability being applied at either strategic or practice level in HE. In this regard, this body of knowledge appears to be hidden and disconnected from where it may have the most potential value.

Further demonstrating the links between HE and the workplace and the need to consider the development of appropriate competencies in students, O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005:441) state that:

The need for competent performance at work is a powerful one at all occupational levels including the professional level. To achieve this there is a need to link the educational process to competent performance at work.

There are both advocates and detractors for accepting the need for these links. The former work of Skills Active, now being led by CIMSPA, is evidence of attempts to



make this connection, in trying to engage with the HE sector again through their newly planned endorsement programme.

In relation to bringing industry and higher education together, Jackson (2008) discusses that while accounting for specific industry-related competencies within the curriculum may have some benefits, in terms of increasing confidence that graduates will develop their abilities in these areas. This is by no means a guarantee of complete mastery. For alignment to be possible, Jackson (2008) suggests that first there needs to be open communication between education and industry regarding the specific competencies for inclusion in the student's programmes of study. Second, full consideration needs to be given to the pedagogical design intended to enable the development of these competencies. Both elements can be seen to be lacking in at least some places: not one industry representative was included on the advisory board that worked on the last two versions of the QAA Subject Benchmarks for sport.

Nearly fifty years ago, McClelland (1973) was an advocate of a competency-based approach, and he conducted research in the US that looked at the use of testing for intelligence employed by schools, colleges and employers. He was critical of the reliance on intelligence testing, stating that "Its tests have tremendous power over the lives of young people by stamping some of them "qualified" and others "less qualified" for college work", McClelland (1973:1). Although this research was conducted some time ago, and being considerate that it was carried out in the US rather than the UK, these sentiments may still be seen to have direct relevance here to this day.

Currently, in the UK, there is a great deal of attention and focus given to exam results and grades as a means of assessing performance and success in the education system. Funding is the most powerful leverage used within this climate, where league tables and institutional competition is the norm. Yet overall, the literature challenges this approach, so for whose benefit is it? How do grades in assignments relate to other areas of an individual's life? McClelland (1973:2) states:

Researchers have in fact had a great difficult demonstrating that grades in school are related to any other behaviours of importance – other than doing well on aptitude tests.

Could the same be said today? Anecdotal evidence from industry suggests that this may be the case, with examples of first-class graduates with strong curriculum vitae attending interviews and being unable to articulate their experiences, with a lack of any real passion, conviction and understanding of the workplace being all too common.

McClelland (1973) goes on to recount evidence of his experiences as a teacher in college, working with a group of students. He took a sample of the top-grade students and the lowest achievers in his class and then investigated what they were doing fifteen to eighteen years later, having left college. McClelland found his results somewhat surprising, in that he could not clearly distinguish between these two groups, and with both having individuals working as doctors, lawyers, scientists and teachers. The only main difference he could establish was that the high achievers had gone to the 'better' law and medical schools, yet after graduating, their careers had seen no greater advantage over those attending supposedly lesser schools. This is supported by the work of Neisser (1976), who was one of the first psychologists to highlight the key differences between being academically gifted and *practical intelligence* (cited in Williams, 1996:514). Again, whilst this research is dated, it would appear that little has changed.

Sternberg's (1985) *Triarchic Theory of Intelligence* considers that individuals possess abilities in three main domains; analytic, creative and practical (cited in Williams, 1996:516). The practical element is about an individual's ability to establish and maintain relationships with others, once again highlighting the need to consider beyond the analytical in the strategies and practice employed in higher education today.

## **Summary**

Considering the body of literature reviewed in this thesis, it has been identified that there is currently a clear gap in the relationship between understanding employability and the subsequent related discourse and reported practice being undertaken to address it. From the body of literature reviewed, specific areas of focus have been identified that need to be considered in order to effectively underpin broader and more effective future learning and teaching approaches to employability. Chapter 2

highlighted the narrow way in which employability is currently understood by government, the media and many in HE, and includes some of the research that focuses on skills development for employment (Artess et al., 2017). Chapter 3 then uncovers what has been called here a *hidden body of literature* that is, disregarded by the wider sector, disconnected from current practice, and that certainly challenges the status quo - critically by highlighting the importance of looking beyond skills, with the value of other areas of associated learning being made very clear.

An opportunity clearly exists to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge in this respect, by seeking to define and develop an approach to employability in HE that is informed by the research, centres on learning experiences in both the curriculum and beyond, and which focuses on more than knowledge and skills, adopting a discourse that is engaging for a range of stakeholders.

The desire here is to determine how employability in its widest sense is understood and interpreted at both strategic and practice level in HE, and specifically with undergraduate sports programmes.

To date, the conceptual models of employability presented within this research offer the most comprehensive definitions of employability available. Therefore, their value in analysing current understanding and interpretations in practice was deemed to be advantageous. This, combined with the fact that there has been little critical research conducted on the application of any of these models to date, presented an interesting opportunity for further study and which is now considered in the following chapters.

# Chapter 4

## Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodological approach and specific methods utilised in this thesis. To meet the aims and objectives, this largely qualitative study adopted a staged mixed methods approach with some basic quantitative analysis used during the survey stage. Underpinned by a social constructivist paradigm, the methods used focused on establishing current understanding and interpretations of employability amongst the participant groups. From this perspective, an interpretive approach was decided as being most appropriate.

In the first stage of this research, a national survey was circulated to all HE institutions in the UK offering undergraduate, single subject sports degree programmes. Sampling targeted academics specifically, this allowed a general overview of current provision in the sector to be established. A smaller sample of institutions was then taken forward to the second stage, reviewing the survey findings, with a view to selecting two institutions where more in-depth case studies could be conducted.

The selection of the two case study institutions was based on several variables. Participants in the national survey were asked if they would be willing to be involved with a more in-depth follow-up study, so there was an element of self-selection. In addition, the selection was based on several logistical factors, ensuring that I was able to obtain access to leaders, academics, students and documentation. With this thesis being conducted on a part-time basis, time and capacity were serious considerations, with any travel requirements needing to be compatible with ongoing work commitments.

A qualitative approach was adopted with the Universities A and B selected for in-depth case studies, to explore the understanding and interpretations of selected leaders, academics and students in more detail using interviews, focus groups and a simple review of selected key documentation.

## *Aims and objectives*

Through a review of the literature concerned with employability and HE, a body of work that has been identified as seeking to define employability (e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a). In addition, a diverse body of work describing how employability has been addressed in practice within specific subject areas has also been identified (Minten, 2010, Maguire and Hogan, 2004, Rivers and O'Brien, 2019 and Zarb et al., 2019). However, there appears to be a gap in the literature concerned with how understanding and interpretations of employability inform subsequent practice, and how this relates to the conceptual models in the literature. Taking this into account, the following research aims were developed:

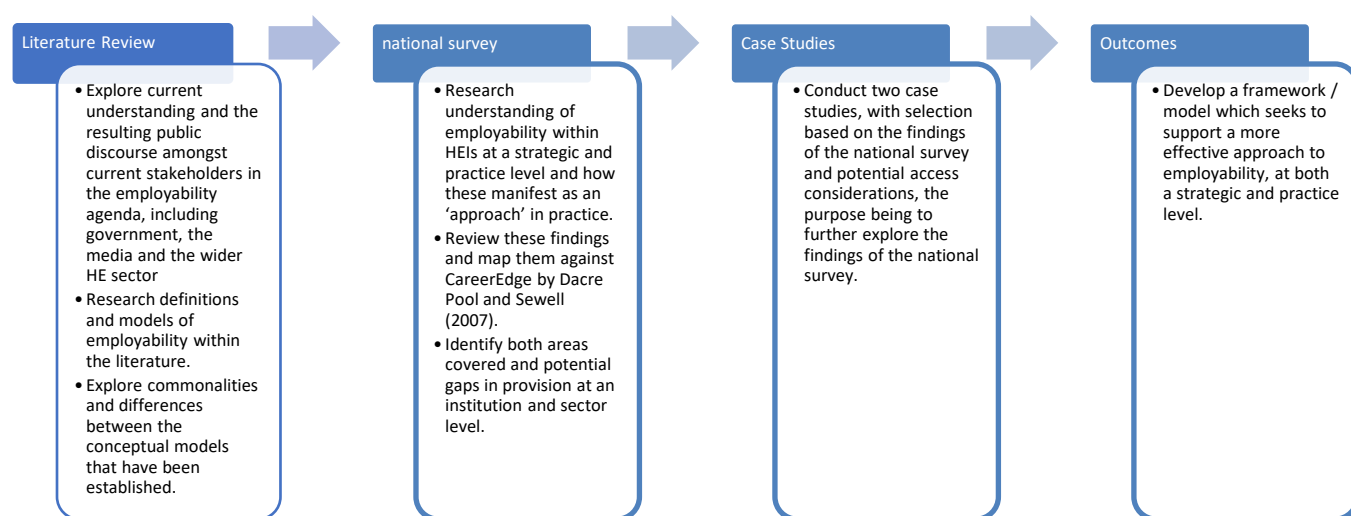
1. To establish current understanding of employability at a strategic and practice level within HEIs that currently offer undergraduate, single subject, sports related degree programmes, and to reflect how this then relates to the employability literature.
2. To develop a framework/model that provides clarity to this area of study at a strategic and practice level, and which articulates a more effective approach to employability.

These research aims resulted in the following areas of work being defined:

1. Examining how selected leaders in institutions understand employability at a strategic level.
2. Examining how academics and students understand employability at a practice level on sports degree programmes.
3. Exploring whether there was a connection between both levels of understanding and if so, how this manifests within sports degree programmes.
4. How can both levels of understanding be better aligned and translated into a systematic and more effective approach to employability?

This figure below outlines the activity involved in each stage of the methodology.

*Figure 6: Summary of the methods*



### *Sampling strategy*

Before proceeding with this research, ethical approval was obtained on two occasions. The first was prior to the national survey being conducted (23/7/13 granted by Buckinghamshire New University see Appendix A) and the second before the case studies were conducted (2/3/15 granted by Northumbria University see Appendix B).

During the national survey stage, a search of the UCAS website (2012) using the key word *sport* followed by all courses yielded 1,162 courses available. They included BA (Hons), Foundation Degrees and Higher National Diplomas across 147 further and higher education institutions. However, this study was focused on full-time, undergraduate, honours degree level programmes that were offered as single subjects, rather than as joint subject degree programmes. Taking these variables into account, this reduced the potential sample size to 71 higher education institutions, a more manageable potential sample to engage with.

By visiting the websites of each of these institutions, the email addresses of the academic staff teaching on the undergraduate sports programmes were identified. Between four and six academics were then emailed directly for introductions, including the purpose of my study and to provide a link to the online survey. This was *purposive sampling*, where specific people were selected as being directly involved and with

specialist knowledge in the relevant topic, in this case undergraduate sports programmes, Walliman (2016). The table below indicates the overall scale of this stage of the research (see Appendix G)

Following an initial three-week period from the point of sending the first email, a reminder email was re-sent to the same people, requesting their support and completion of the survey. Where I had personal contacts at specific institutions, I also made direct contact to ask for their additional support in order to secure the engagement of their colleagues.

*Table 2: National survey sample (final sample n=69 academics teaching on undergraduate sports programmes)*

<b>Individual emails sent</b>	<b>Institutions contacted</b>	<b>Institutions represented by the sample</b>	<b>Usable individual academic responses</b>
410	71	36	69

For the second stage of the research, the case studies, purposive sampling was adopted, identifying participants who had a particular expertise in the topic being studied (Patton, 2002, cited in Flick, 2015:105), undergraduate sports programmes. Elements of snowball sampling (Walliman, 2016) then allowed participant numbers to be developed further when required. Combined, this sampling approach and engaging potential participants through my personal contacts within institutions, proved to be effective.

From the two selected institutional case studies, one individual contact was identified from each as the main point of contact, in order to support logistics and planning when conducting the interviews and focus groups, for example in terms of room bookings, reaching student participants and accessing the relevant documentation.

With the focus of this thesis being on undergraduate sports programmes, students and academics directly associated with this area were targeted. Leaders who had both

direct and indirect knowledge of undergraduate sports programmes were also identified and approached to request their participation in this study.

Appendix G includes the text used in the invitations for all participants, together with background information outlining the details of this study.

*Table 3: Case studies sample (n= 2 institutions)*

Participants	Individual Interviews	Focus Groups	Sample Characteristics
Students (n=22)	NA	<p>Institution A x 3 focus groups (n=12 students)</p> <p>Institution B x 3 focus groups (n=10 students)</p>	<p>Institution A - 3 students from Level 4, 4 students from Level 5, 5 students from Level 6</p> <p>Institution B - 2 students from Level 4, 4 students from Level 5, 4 students from Level 6</p> <p>Male – 9 participants total Female – 13 participants total</p>
Academics (n=25)	<p>Institution A x 7 individual interviews</p> <p>Institution B x 7 individual interviews</p>	<p>Institution A x 1 focus group (n=6 academics)</p> <p>Institution B x 1 focus group (n=5 academics)</p>	<p>Programmes represented in the sample included: BA (Hons) Sport Development, BSc (Hons) Sport Coaching, BSc (Hons) Sport Management, Sport, BSc (Hons) Exercise and Nutrition, BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science</p> <p>Male – 15 participants total Female – 10 participants total</p>
Leaders (n=8)	<p>Institution A x 4 individual interviews</p> <p>Institution B x 4 individual interviews</p>	NA	<p>Institution A – Head of Department, Head of Careers and Employability, Registrar &amp; Associate Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching</p> <p>Institution B – Head of Department, Head of Careers, Registrar, Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching</p> <p>Male – 5 participants total Female – 3 participants total</p>



### *Literature review*

How the literature review was conducted has been outlined previously. This literature review was an integral feature of the methodology in this thesis, as establishing an evidence base was an essential first step, in order to both inform the subsequent research aims and design, and also, critically to underpin my unique contribution to the body of knowledge in the area of employability.

In order to respond to the specific research aims, as stated in this thesis, a point of reference had to first be established, to facilitate effective reflection on the current understanding and interpretation of employability by all participants in this study.

Finally, to respond to the second research aim, the findings alone from this thesis would not have been sufficient and in this respect, the literature review added a critical dimension, both in combination with the findings and in supporting the development and presentation of the taxonomy, which is shared in Chapters 7 and 8.

### *Phase one - national survey*

The national survey was broken down into three key areas of work as follows:

- Research the definitions and understandings of employability within HEIs at an academic / teaching level with a sample of institutions that currently offer sports-related degree programmes.
- Utilise the *Career Edge* model of employability by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) as an initial point of reference, to identify and map emerging themes.
- Identify shared practice across institutions, and potential gaps in the understanding and interpretations of employability in relation to the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) amongst academics teaching on sports degree programmes.

### *Phase two - case studies*

These involved the following areas of work:

- Conduct two in-depth case studies with institutions that offer sports degree programmes, with access to leaders, academics and students. The purpose of the case studies was to both verify and explore the findings of the national survey, using interviews, focus groups and some basic document review.

### *Research outcome*

As a result of both the previous two stages, the desired research outcome was to develop a framework / model based on the findings of the national survey, case studies and extended literature review. This would provide clarity in terms of how to interpret and address employability more effectively at both a strategic and practice level on sports degree programmes.

### **Approaches to research design**

The purpose of the following section is to outline the rationale behind the methodological approach selected. Starting with a holistic overview, according to Lincoln and Guba (n.d), a *paradigm* is a set of personal beliefs that guide our actions and provide the lens through which we may interpret the world in front of us. In relation to this research, the actions were guided by the belief that knowledge is developed and shared between individuals. Denzin and Lincoln (2003:35) state “This constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings).” In this respect, those currently working within HE adopt a personal view of reality, of what they believe employability to mean, and then choose to adopt specific practices in order to address this reality. Or alternatively, they may choose to not engage, as they may not feel a sense of responsibility for this agenda. If the viewpoint is largely shared then this would constitute a common view; alternatively, individual views may exist in isolation and potentially, contradiction with one another.

The aim of this research was to investigate interpretations of employability within HE with those who teach on undergraduate sports programmes, and with those who manage and set strategic direction. From this perspective, clearly an interpretive approach is most appropriate, with the belief that knowledge, in this case relating to employability, has been developed through both shared experiences with others and

through individual personal experience. Therefore, epistemologically, *social constructivism* would also be an area of relevance to this research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

Schwandt (2003), cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2003), distinguishes an interpretive perspective as one that suggests that a specific human action is inherently meaningful. This therefore suggests that an individual's views and interpretations of a given area will guide the subsequent practices adopted to address that area of work, thus demonstrating how meaning is translated into action.

The HE sector consists of employees from a wide range of backgrounds, with varying experiences and different areas of expertise. If adopting the view that individuals are continually learning throughout life, it seems feasible to suggest that knowledge may be developed further and derived through social interactions with those around us. Denzin and Lincoln (2003:305) support this notion by stating:

Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind – but active; that is, mind does something with these impressions, at the very least forming abstractions or concepts. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) go on to suggest that, as individuals, we develop concepts, models and theories that help us make sense of our lived experience, and that we continue to test these thoughts with the benefit of the experiences we gain through life. These constructions are not developed in isolation, but take place in the context of sharing understanding with others through practical experiences and the language adopted. Applying this thinking to employability, its meaning and how it translates into practice, varies between individuals and organisations. Despite the frequent use of the word *employability* at the highest level, as previously cited in the literature review, it remains a contested term used in a range of contexts (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Supporting this notion, Philpott (1999) describes employability as a *buzzword* that is used often but interpreted in different ways., This range of perceived meanings is likely to have had implications on the practices adopted to address the employability development needs. Where understanding is narrow, such as when employability is

interpreted merely in terms of skills or a single job, then the practice designed and intended for development may also be narrow, potentially resulting in other key areas in need of development not even being considered for example attitude and behaviours.

Considering the role of academic staff as a key component of the learning process and why an interpretive approach should be adopted in this research:

Realism also argues that the knowledge people have of their social world affects their behaviour and, unlike the propositions of positivism and empiricism, the social world does not simply 'exist' independently of this knowledge. However, people's knowledge may be partial or incomplete.

May (1993:6)

These views align with the significant work of the eminent Russian scholar Vygotsky, who highlighted the influence of the social world as part of any attempt to understand the individual (cited in Wertsch, 1988). In this regard an academic's knowledge of employability will have been developed within a social environment and will subsequently manifest itself in terms of their selected pedagogical approach and behaviour in a work environment. This is likely to have a direct impact on both the student experience and potential learning in relation to employability. If knowledge of employability is partial or incomplete for both academic and student, then this is also likely to affect an individual's behaviours and actions.

This thinking aligns with work by Gordon Training International in the 1970s, which introduced the concept of the four stages of learning, where the learner may transition through from *unconscious incompetence*, to *conscious incompetence*, to *conscious competence* to *unconscious competence*. At unconscious incompetence, the individual is unaware of their lack of knowledge, experience or expertise in a specific area. At this stage, "How do you know, what you don't know?" becomes a factor. In the case of academics working in HE, their knowledge - and specifically their knowledge of employability - might sometimes be defined as:

The content of technical information needed to perform adequately in the job; it is generally obtained through formal education and or on-the-job-experience. Knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient for job performance.

Porteous (1997:86)

What is interesting in this definition, taken from a book on Occupational Psychology, is the use of the word *adequately*, rather than using much more positive words relating to job performance. In addition, it is suggested that anyone working in HE, or who is otherwise employed, has knowledge of employability that originates from their own personal experiences, rather than being a specific subject that they may have studied or read about.

This research, therefore, sought to identify an individual's knowledge and understanding around the area of employability at both strategic and practice levels, and how this was subsequently reported to be addressed in practice. According to Gall et al. (1996:16) "Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated." This is therefore an area that will hold significance in relation to this research. In considering epistemological approaches, Gall et al. (1996) go on to suggest that most of the research in education that had been conducted at the time was based on a *positivist epistemology*. However, this has changed in more recent years. A positivist approach is considered to be one where the researcher gathers data free from any bias, and that this constitutes true scientific knowledge (Gall et al. 1996). This research approach is normally associated with a quantitative methodology, and is supported by much of the research conducted by psychologists such as Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008). These psychologists led in terms of defining the areas of emotional intelligence and emotional and social competencies considered to be important to employability by Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), and adopted a quantitative approach to support and validate their work. Whilst these observations may have emerged from the field of psychology, the links between employability and psychology have previously been made clear in the literature review.

Despite this methodology being highlighted by the authors cited above, this research adopted a predominately qualitative and post-positivist approach, with the inclusion of

some basic statistics where required. The justification for adopting a qualitative approach is the very nature of this research, seeking to explore current understandings and interpretations of employability and the resulting and associated discourse, specifically, with those individuals both involved with setting institutional strategy, and those directly responsible for leading and delivering on undergraduate sports programmes. A primarily quantitative approach would not be appropriate for the descriptive nature of this research. However, this research also sought to identify what the most prevalent understandings, views and interpretations were, as observed in the resulting discourse amongst the leader, academic and student participant groups. At a basic level, the frequency of particular terminology used within the discussions was considered to be a suitable indicator of the most commonly held views being expressed in each sample group. With this in mind, a mixed methods approach was considered to be most appropriate. Walliman (2016:33) advocates the value of mixed methods, stating:

There are real advantages to mixed methods, comparing results from different approaches which is triangulation and which if they align will only further strengthen your conclusions.

Being able to compare the results of the national survey with the findings of the case studies was certainly advantageous in developing the key findings of this thesis.

Exploring this further, May (1993:8) suggests that "To concentrate on subjectivity we focus on the meanings that people give to their environment, not the environment itself." This links to one of the key research aims in this thesis, the university environment, where leaders, academics and their students will experience and form their own meanings. As a researcher adopting a constructivist view, it is important to note, via the methods adopted, how individuals construct their own social reality, in order to understand their approach to their teaching with students, their interpretation of employability as a broader concept and how this may manifest itself in a classroom setting. Using the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) as an example of an employability model provided a framework for better understand the findings of the national survey in relation to one of the most prominent published conceptual models.

Considering how the findings would subsequently be interpreted from a sociological perspective, May (1993:21) stated:

Instead of descending upon the social world armed with a body of theoretical propositions about how and why social relations exist and work as they do, we should first observe these relations, collect data on them, and then proceed to generate our theoretical propositions.

This, in part, reflects the case study approach adopted in the second phase of this research, and while not written in relation to employability, the approach of observing, collecting data, reflecting then potentially adapting practices has relevance here. Once again, it is important to understand and acknowledge the theoretical influences of both my knowledge and experience, and to consider their existence as both a practitioner within the subject of this study, but also as a researcher seeking to operate in an appropriate manner.

With a background as a practitioner in industry, my beliefs and values have been developed throughout my life and from a wide range of contexts, within the UK and from working in several countries in Asia. This culmination of life experiences to date determines my view of the world, both at a holistic level and at a local level in my day to day activities, through my life at work and in the home. These experiences of different cultures and with people from a wide range of backgrounds have influenced how I think, and how I view the world and this has had a direct impact on my personal philosophy - and therefore the subsequent approach to this research. I needed to ensure that I had reflected and considered how these experiences might influence my behaviour and overall perceptions, to avoid bias, and ensure I remained as objective as possible throughout the research process. In summary, an interpretive, social constructivist paradigm is guiding the overall research philosophy behind this thesis.

The decision to adopt a mixed methods approach is further justified as the focus of this thesis is on “the study of multiple social realities, that is, the different realities created by different individuals as they interact in a social environment.” (Gall et al., 1996:19), therefore, intentionally adopting a *post-positivist* and qualitative view. The aim was to not focus solely on the quantification of the social environment and interactions observed, but more to understand the type of interactions observed and

philosophy guiding these interactions. The messages that are conveyed by leaders and academics and the way that they are then interpreted by each student within the room - each having different prior experiences, knowledge and interests in the area - will directly impact on the ability and opportunity for learning to occur. It would clearly be challenging to accurately describe this using a positivist and quantitative approach in isolation.

To further ground this research with a focus on the application, “.... some theorists have argued that the theoretical constructs of research should simply reflect the same everyday constructs which people use to interpret social life” (May, 1993: 29). May (1993) cites Shutz (1979) as supporting this view. The institutions involved in this research will all be engaging with a wide range of external industry organisations and partners, and the most important viewpoint in relation to employability might be considered to be the qualitative views of employer such as these, rather than any overly simplistic numerical value gained through testing and the use of statistics. This approach is therefore concerned with sharing meaning of the true value of what is essentially a complex area, not easily captured by any single measurement. A common-sense approach is being adopted here, and as May (1993: 29) states “Our theories are now assumed to be grounded in people’s everyday understandings”. Regarding employability, this perhaps captures the true essence of the world of work, where personal relationships, effectiveness and success in the workplace and the ability to develop and maintain a successful career, are assumed to be effectively understood.

As alluded to earlier, it is important to both acknowledge and disclose at an early stage of this research that it will not be possible to completely distance myself from the research process, due to the nature of work that I am and was involved in, leading and developing employability at an institutional level. This approach is acceptable according to Gall et al. (1996:20), who states:

...some researchers make explicit their constructivist role in scientific enquiry by writing research reports in which they play a key role alongside their research participants.



Clearly, my previous positions may have had a direct impact with certain former colleagues, and subsequently this may then have had an impact on the experience of students. Gall et al. (1996:20) go on to state that “This focus on the researcher’s self as an integral constructor of the social reality being studied is called reflexivity”. Having direct connections with both the case study institutions, while certainly of value in terms of access, meant that there was potential for research participants to have been influenced. Therefore, during all interactions between myself and the participants, I took all reasonable steps to remain impartial. This was not easy at times, particularly when academic participants referred to previous engagements where I had been directly involved in the responses they described, for example, where we had previously spoken about a particular issue and had perhaps not agreed on a particular point. In these situations, I tried to limit my response, to ensure that I kept the focus groups and interviews on track and targeted at the areas where I was specifically seeking their input.

### *Related literature*

Ultimately, this work was informed by contemporary research in the fields of education, pedagogy and employability, with influences from the field of psychology. Supporting the links between psychology and educational research, Gall et al. (1996: 23) state that “Psychology in turn has had a strong influence on educational research, which too has a strong positivist tradition”, Again, this highlights how this research will adopt an alternative approach: one which has a primarily qualitative focus, with some basic quantitative analysis being conducted in order to consider the data gathered at a national level during the survey stage. Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) offer the following definition of this approach:

Qualitative research is multi-method in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of their meanings people bring to them.

This resonates strongly with this research topic, the desire to study and better understand the institutional environment in relation to both employability and the associated academic frameworks that underpin it - all in the context of undergraduate

sports programmes and with a view to developing a new framework / model to support more effective future approaches. From an academic perspective, authors such as Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Hillage and Pollard (1998), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a), have all adopted interpretive approaches, seeking to define employability and its component features, in the main, for use within an HE setting. Employability as an ongoing, lifelong and complex process, clearly exceeds the confines of HE alone. Therefore, other parties, with a vested interest in employability have also sought to interpret it within their own contexts. Examples seen in government-led reports, such as the Dearing report in 1997 and Leitch Review in 2006, focus on the skills of the workforce as being potentially more tangible and simpler concepts to consider and ultimately measure. The model from Fugate et al. (2004) also developed primarily for application outside of a HE context, designed to support those unemployed and seeking to gain employment in the US.

The national focus on education at all levels, and how relative success is judged, is currently concerned with how many students pass exams and how many students achieve 'A' grades or equivalent. This then moves on to how the figures compare to previous years, all of which is subsequently translated into league tables where institutions are measured against each other. This is a quantitative evaluation rather than a qualitative one, and may be described as convenience-led rather than as an actual measure of success. It is, therefore, not surprising that when so much emphasis is placed on these numbers, their reputational value and ultimately the impact this may have on student numbers and the financial reward attached, leadership and teaching will focus on meeting their targets. Developing other student qualities and dispositions - the *softer skills* as they are often referred to, such as self-awareness and resilience - becomes secondary, as these qualities are not as readily measurable at scale as knowledge. This appears to be too much of a cause-and-effect relationship to be merely coincidence. The importance of other areas of learning are flagged in the research by Lopes et al. (2004) and Kumar (2007:147) who states:

In recent times interpersonal or emotional intelligence has received a great deal of attention, probably due to the demand from employers for 'team players' who can work well with others. This view is supported by a number of industry people, it goes beyond being a 'team player' and is about an all-round ability to

work with 'other people' effectively both internal and external to your organization.

This is further supported by Rozell et al. (2002:284) and their research. "The literature reviewed has indicated that one's emotions play an important part in workplace behaviour." If there is a clear link between emotions, behaviour and performance, then their management in the workplace is clearly an area that warrants further consideration and qualification within the education sector, including how success is ultimately measured. Interestingly, former Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, convened an expert advisory group to consider character education in schools (Smullian, 2019), perhaps the start of something that could be extremely positive in the future if these potential areas of learning are to be valued within the current bank of metrics within schools in England.

As further evidence of the need to consider more than quantifiable knowledge through grades alone, Yorke and Knight (2006a) highlight the importance of the work of Bennett et al. (2000), who identified four management skills that may be applied in a range of contexts. The first two are relevant to this research: management of self and management of others. These two areas may be considered to directly relate to the concept of multiple intelligences by Gardner (1999), who referred to intrapersonal intelligence which relates to self and interpersonal intelligence, being concerned with the ability to relate to others. This also aligns with the work of Lopes et al. (2004) cited above, who explicitly highlight the importance of interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. These authors are all from different disciplines, yet there is a distinct crossover here between work on employability, applied and cognitive psychology, and what is currently happening in HE. The essence of the themes discussed above relate to people and relationships. From this perspective, a mixed methods and interpretive approach to research provided a deeper account, going beyond the possibilities of a more quantitative and positivist approach.

As cited previously, to date there has been limited research conducted on a national scale in relation to employability, with most work focusing on individual departments or subject areas within single institutions (Artess et al., 2017).

Following a review of both the Higher Education Academy and Higher Education Funding Council websites for previous research publications, several large-scale projects were identified. None of these, however, have specifically attempted to identify interpretations of employability, or map employability provision using any published models or frameworks.

The Higher Education Funding Council conducted a study in 2003 looking at how HE influenced the employability of graduates across five different subject areas. The methods utilised included visiting thirty-four departments in eight universities; they reviewed first destination data from all these departments in 2000 and went on to conduct a telephone survey of the working graduates and their line managers, (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012). This multi-layered, staged approach was also adopted for this study, beginning with the national survey and followed by two in-depth case studies.

Another example of a large-scale longitudinal research project can be seen in the work of the Institute for Employment Research (IER), based at the University of Warwick. Their *Futuretrack* project started in 2005/2006 and ended in 2011, and followed 50,000 students from their initial UCAS application through to their first employment (Futuretrack, 2012). This research had a specific focus on students outcomes rather than on the institutional approach and consideration of the leaders and academic viewpoints, as included in this thesis.

Research conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Academy by Butcher et al. (2011) reviewed the work of 18 out of the 22 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, established in 2004. This research was focused on reviewing good practice in relation to employability and enterprise development. The questions this immediately raises, is how was *good practice* in employability defined and identified? Similarly, there are questions around the study by HEFCE highlighted above, which sought to better understand the impact of HE on graduate employability by primarily reviewing first destination employment data. This lack of appreciation for this as an employment metric rather than an employability metric is problematic, but certainly not an uncommon feature within the wider body of research (Artess et al., 2017 and Bridgstock, 2009).

It is evident that there has been a variety of research in employability undertaken to date, but none so far that has specifically addressed understanding of employability and how this subsequently translates at both a strategic and practice level, nor how it then relates to the conceptual employability models published in the literature.

The wider body of literature on employability is commonly either concerned with defining the meaning of the concept, or tends to be based on descriptive studies of specific programmes, initiatives and interventions designed to address employability in practice. In fact, the sector has sought to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes designed to address employability for many years. Yet the logic of this work continues to be somewhat flawed, because without an accepted definition of *employability*, what is actually being measured? The sector is far from in agreement on precisely what employability means (Gazier 1998, Hillage and Pollard 1998, and Philpott 1999), so to discuss measurement of employability without this definition seems to be of limited value.

With literature available on defining employability, and literature available describing how it is being addressed in HEIs, there appears to be a natural gap around how an individual's knowledge and understanding of employability directly influences their own practices, either, by setting strategy or designing practical activities to deliver in the classroom. This would suggest a need for research to focus on the dynamic or relationship between these two factors. The praxis between these areas is key: clearly an individual's knowledge, understanding, skills, experience, beliefs and values will guide their behaviour in relation to employability. The question is, therefore, what is the point of reference being adopted by individuals and organisations currently? On what basis are activities being designed to address employability, what informs them and what is their underpinning rationale?

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that there is little in terms of a rationale, or point of reference, that is informing either employability practice or strategy in HE, and that existing approaches are generally not based on research. This was a specific question asked within the national survey and case studies in this thesis and ultimately demonstrated that this was an accurate reflection.

This assertion was also supported by Trapp et al. (2011) on behalf of the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, The British Psychological Society and the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments in their report on the future of psychology degrees. This document made significant references to employability, yet the sources of literature that informed the report were limited and did not include any of the key literature that has previously sought to define *employability*. Therefore, the actions they describe to address employability are based on their understanding, which appears to be based in turn on the specific literature that they had read. Had they read other sources, they may have perhaps adopted a different view and then decided on a different course of action on how best to address employability in the future.

## Methodology overview

Table 4 provides a summary of the stages of research that were conducted as part of this thesis.

*Table 4: Research stages summary*

STAGE	AIM	METHODS	SAMPLE	OUTCOMES
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	To establish current understanding of employability in the literature at both a conceptual and practice level	Literature review	Journals, books, reports, websites	An overview of how employability is currently understood, and its positioning at strategic and practice level
<b>PILOT FOLLOWED BY NATIONAL SURVEY</b>	To establish current interpretations of employability at a practice level within the given sample	Survey	All HEIs offering single subject sports degree programmes	A sector-wide overview of current interpretations of employability
<b>CASE STUDIES</b>	To establish further details of current interpretations of employability at strategy and practice level within the second sample	Interviews, focus groups, limited document review	Selected based on the initial survey results and logistical considerations	Two case studies completed
<b>REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS</b>	To develop a framework / model that provides clarity to this area of study at strategic and practice level and underpins more effective future approaches	Review of the findings and previous literature	NA	Proposed framework / model to address employability in a more effective manner

## Methods

### *Survey*

Phase one of this research sought to address the following question:

- *How do academics understand and approach employability at a practice level?*

Based on a review of the literature, there has been no national study that considers how employability is understood and interpreted in any specific subject area, or across several institutions. Therefore, the survey supports this thesis in seeking to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge in this respect.

### Administering the survey

In the first instance, contact was made with all institutions that offered sports-related undergraduate degree programmes to attempt to map current interpretations and provision in relation to employability. The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey, administered on my behalf by a colleague in the IT department where the software licence was held. A URL link was generated for the survey which I then personally emailed directly, together with an explanatory email (see Appendix G), to academics at the targeted institutions across the sector. This work was conducted prior to national GDPR requirements coming into place, and academics were emailed using addresses obtained from their institution's web pages.

Securing responses from academics at this stage was certainly a challenge. Reflecting on this, receiving an email from an individual that they did not know may have clearly been one factor that influenced the response rate. Where possible, I therefore sought to maximise existing relationships, contacting individuals I knew personally and asking for personal introductions to other academics teaching on undergraduate sports programmes who may be willing to complete the survey. This could be described as snowball sampling (Walliman, 2016) and illustrates the need to be flexible, conducting a range of sampling approaches across this research in order to increase the number of responses.

As a result, there were several rounds of emails circulated, each sent individually to a named member of the academic team at selected institutions. In this way, every step possible was taken to try and maximise the final number of responses.

The survey aimed to establish several key factors, including:

1. Understanding of employability, and the rationale behind that understanding
2. Specific areas of work within the broader employability agenda
3. Common areas currently being addressed
4. Potential gaps in provision within institutions and the wider sector, in relation to an existing model of employability

The survey used open-ended questions (see Appendix C) to ascertain interpretations of employability by sports academics within an institution. No explanation or single model of employability from the literature was offered as an example at this stage. In this way, a more accurate picture could be established of exactly how those in practice understood and viewed employability and how this was then reported to have informed their practice.

The survey had largely a qualitative focus, to capture the meanings and values behind individuals' understanding of employability. In addition, consideration was also given to the relative frequency of these findings within the samples.

The survey is one of perhaps the most commonly-used descriptive methods in educational research (Cohen and Manion, 1996). According to Cohen and Manion (1996:83):

Typically, surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared or determining the relationships that exist between specific events.

This was precisely the intention of this research, seeking to describe employability provision at a national level in relation to undergraduate sports degree programmes. Then to go further, considering the relationships that existed between knowledge and



understanding or interpretation within practice. Fink and Kosecoff (1985:14), similarly discuss the use of surveys to “evaluate the effectiveness of programs to change people’s knowledge, attitudes, health, or welfare”. Therefore, a survey was considered to be appropriate in terms of seeking to assess the current approach to employability, within undergraduate sports programmes.

Surveys may involve several techniques for gathering data, from interviews to questionnaires, but as Cohen and Manion (1996) highlight, they usually follow a number of specified stages. In relation to the scale of this research, a questionnaire format was adopted for the purpose of seeking to gather data at a national level. The survey findings were then later explored through interviews, focus groups and an initial document review within two selected case studies.

Cohen and Manion (1996) go on to discuss the ‘purpose of the enquiry’ and break this down into several key stages. In the first instance, they discuss how a specific central aim needs to be identified. In this case, the aim was to identify current knowledge and understanding, and subsequent interpretations of employability with those associated with leading and delivering undergraduate sports degree programmes. The second stage requires the identification of additional topics that connect back to the main purpose. In this research, this involved application of the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), using the specified components of their model to then map current understanding against each element. One of the reasons that the Career Edge model was selected was its simplicity and practical value. To aid understanding across a large-scale sample, it was essential to use clear language and terminology, and the Career Edge model holds this advantage over the USEM model by Knight and Yorke (2004), which - while well-regarded within the academic community - is not readily translatable into practice in its original format.

The third and final stage, according to the Cohen and Manion (1996), involves deciding on the specific information that you require at each stage of the research. This is where the data-gathering techniques differed, and supports the decision to adopt a mixed methods approach, using both a survey and case studies.

### *Connecting institutional strategy and practice*

As previously stated, the findings from the survey were reviewed in relation to components of the Career Edge model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Another reason for using this model is that Career Edge was developed for a specific purpose, to define employability and its component elements in a way that was clear for academics, students and parents alike. In addition, to date there has been no research published that has critiqued the Career Edge model, therefore using this framework at a national level provided the opportunity to consider the relative value of models as tools more broadly within this area of work.

From the perspective of this research, models are considered useful as points of reference for better understanding research findings, delineating specific components of employability to provide structure for this reflection. Engaging with conceptual models provides a starting point from where reflection can begin, considering the value and merit of the inclusion of specific features, or whether specific features are missing and need to be added. For this research, using the Career Edge model as the basis for the coding exercise helped to address time constraints. Equally, it also provided a quick and relatively straightforward way of being able to compare academics' current understanding and interpretations in practice with how employability has been conceptually defined in the literature. No single model is being advocated above any other here. Alternative models may also have been used; however, Career Edge was deemed the most appropriate on this occasion, with the similarities discussed across each of the models reviewed in Chapter 3 adding further justification for its selection (Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Kumar, 2007 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

### *Pilot studies*

Before conducting research at a national level, an appropriate survey needs to be designed and validated. According to Fink and Kosecoff (1985), a pilot study can be beneficial for a number of reasons: ensuring the wording of the questions are appropriate, checking whether the survey data can be gathered in a consistent manner and determining how relevant the information being gathered by the survey is. Fink and Kosecoff (1985) go on to discuss the importance of seeking to consider *background fluctuations*, which acknowledge that people may respond differently to a

survey depending on a number of factors, such as their current mood, time available or previous experiences. However, they suggest that a reliable survey would yield consistent results of the most important characteristics without undue influence from background characteristics.

*Concurrent validity* may also be relevant in this research, where a new survey may be validated against a known measure, if it already exists. If it does not, it may be possible to compare the respondents' scores to an expert's judgment of their attitudes. A high correlation between the survey and the criterion measure (the established survey or expert judgment) supports concurrent validity, Fink and Koescoff (1985). This, however, relies on the criterion measure being convincing - in this case, the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007).

The wording of the survey should also be considered, and whether the questions are worded clearly so that all questions are completed. Any questions not answered, or unusual patterns in answers, may suggest that the wording may require revisions (Fink and Koescoff, 1985).

This was the primary motivation for conducting a very simple and small-scale pilot exercise in developing the survey (n=8). The pilot was conducted with colleagues within the sports department in the institution where I was based at the time. This provided an opportunity to review the wording of the questions and reflect on the responses, to ascertain the clarity and understanding of what was being asked.

The results of this pilot exercise were used only to inform the design of the final survey, and are therefore not presented as stand-alone results. This iterative process was the desired outcome, rather than the responses themselves.

### *The value of case studies*

Once the national survey was completed as the preliminary stage of the research, case studies were considered to be the most appropriate method to enable more detailed research across multiple institutions. To date there is little agreement in terms of what a *case study* is (Van Wynsberghe and Khan, 2008; Vershuren, 2003), however Yin (1994:13) offers the following definition:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident

In relation to this research, the selection of case studies as an appropriate method was justified, as the desire was to research employability within a university setting and, how it was understood, interpreted and reported to be addressed. Context varies from institution to institution, supporting the selection of multiple case studies as a preferable approach. “The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust”, (Herriot and Firestone, 1983) (cited in Yin, 1994:45), also supported by Creswell (2007), Yin (2005) and Stake (2005). The drawback of conducting multiple case studies may be the resources and time needed to conduct them (Yin, 1994). For these reasons, conducting two case studies was deemed to be manageable, allowing for logistical considerations.

There were several other advantages to the selection of case study as a method, including their potentially flexible design, which could include both qualitative and quantitative features (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Both Flyvbjerg (2006) and Tight (2010) cite the relevance of adopting an interpretivist approach to case studies, which aligns with the selected methodology within this thesis. This is contrary to the view of Yin (2009), who suggests a positivist approach is more suitable.

One further advantage is suggested by Thomas (2011:513), who highlights the benefits of the range of options available under the overarching term *case study*, which include:

...analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods.

For this research, the validity of adopting a case study methodology is evident, with the aim being to research the people, decisions and strategy present in relation to employability in a number of institutions.

Thomas (2011) developed a typology that encourages researchers to consider two main factors, and to select a *subject* and then an *object*. The subject is the broad topic being studied, in this case *employability*, and Yin (2009) refers to this as the *unit of analysis*. The object provides the context, or theoretical framework through which the subject is being viewed. In the case of this research, the object was the individual HEI selected for each case study. Therefore, the subject is the vehicle through which we may be able to further develop our thinking on the object. By studying employability within an institutional context, we would clearly be developing our thinking on how individual institutions approach employability as an area of work.

Conversely, the value of case studies as a method has been criticised by some for their possible lack of rigour and the potential for researcher bias to affect the direction, subsequent findings and conclusions drawn (Yin, 1994). In addition, there are concerns about the potential to be able to generalise from individual case studies (Yin, 1994).

Taking these views into account, and based on the findings of the national survey, two institutions were selected as case studies and for follow-up visits for more in-depth research, through interviews and focus groups with selected leaders, academics and students, with some initial document review. The selection of the two institutions for case studies was based on three factors:

1. Location, size and type of institution
2. Practicalities of access and quality of the contacts held
3. Logistics and the ability to spend time with participants at each institution

In terms of sampling and selection of cases to study, Stake (2005) suggests a practical and realistic approach, which he describes as *leaning* towards the cases where the researcher can learn the most. This leaning may be towards cases where the researcher may have previous knowledge, or perhaps is able to spend more time. Stake (2005) supports these sentiments in suggesting that the ability to focus in detail and have on-going engagement are both key in conducting good case study research.

Cumulatively, these factors led to the selection of the two institutions used as case studies.

## **Research sites**

As stated above, two institutions were selected as case studies from the sample of those participating in the national survey. The following sections provide an outline of the institution type and background, to add further context to this thesis. The sources of the text are not disclosed to ensure the anonymity of the institutions involved.

### *University A*

Founded in the late 1800s as a School of Science and Art, developing from a University College then to full university status over ten years ago. This modern, public university has three campuses in the South of England and currently has approximately 10,000 students. It is currently ranked silver in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework.

Taken from a national website, this university is described as:

Focused on offering employment-focused and skills-based teaching across the creative and cultural industries, management and information sectors and the public sector.

Just under 90% of the student body is undergraduate, with over 75% studying on a full-time basis. Over 90% of students are from the UK and the gender split is 47% male to 53% female.

This institution describes its approach to employability as follows:

The university aims to develop students who are enterprising, employable, and who can lead.

A dedicated team of careers and employment specialists work in partnership with academic staff, employers and the Students' Union to prepare students for the world of work and guide their career management.

University A, website accessed 12/5/19

The university provides opportunities for employability, enterprise and leadership development in a range of extra-curricular activities, as well as work-related learning within academic courses.

With over twenty years' experience in offering sports-related studies, this institution offers a variety of career-focused programmes in the field of sport. Well known for their sports programmes, it maintains strong community links with a wide range of amateur and professional sports-related organisations.

With a focus on hands-on experience and industry knowledge, our graduates leave us highly employable, in a field that values transferable graduate skills and prior engagement with the industry.

University A, website accessed 12/5/19

They currently offer sports programmes in the following areas: Football Development and Performance, Sport and Exercise Science, Sport Development and Coaching, Sports Therapy, Sports and Physical Education, Sports Psychology and Strength and Conditioning.

### *University B*

With its origins around the 1880s and based in the North of England, this institution is a research-rich and business-focused university, with a reputation for academic excellence and strong graduate prospects. With over 25,000 students, its student population is made up of just under 80% undergraduate, 80% studying on a full-time basis and with just over 85% of students from the UK. The student gender split is 44% male to 56% female.

It is also currently ranked silver in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework.

This institution offers students one-to-one advice and support from careers professionals, who help with planning, job applications and searching for jobs, ultimately working out what roles would best fit the individuals. In addition:

Careers advisors also deliver sessions as part of the courses, and a central programme of workshops and events on a wide range of career topics helps students to make decisions about their future and compete effectively for job or further study opportunities.

University B, website accessed 12/5/19

University B has been delivering programmes in sport for over 30 years and is currently in the top 10 sports universities in the UK.

Our students have the opportunity to learn in a friendly, open and supportive environment. Many of programmes are accredited and endorsed by professional and national governing bodies, which help to ensure that we are providing students who have the right attributes when they graduate in the profession of their choice.

University B, website accessed 12/5/19

They currently offer programmes in the following areas: sport and exercise science, strength and conditioning, exercise behaviour, physiology, and sport marketing, management and coaching.

### *Multiple case studies*

By conducting more than one case study, the research potentially addresses the issue of lacking external validity, which may have been problematic if this research was only being conducted within a single university, and not using at least one other institution for comparison (May, 1993). Considering these variables, it was possible to identify whether generalisations could be made across the case studies and sample as a whole (Gall et al., 1996). Gall et al. (1996) believe generalisation is natural to all teachers, as if we observe another teacher adopting a specific technique or approach, we are likely to consider whether these approaches might work within their own



teaching. It is not possible to assume that the same results may be observed, however a trial and error approach may often be adopted within daily teaching routines (Gall et al., 1996).

A range of methods may be used within a case study in order to develop an overall picture or description of a given situation. These methods may include those that involve direct statements, such as surveys, focus groups or interviews; they may be circumstantial such as documentary analysis; or could be observational, involving participants within the study (Cousin, 2005 and Yin, 2005). An ability to handle multiple data sources was certainly key within this research, as was being able to develop a more holistic view to help clarify the overall approach being adopted at both programme and institutional level, if, in fact, there was one overall approach being adopted at all.

This research included a number of the methods highlighted above, which will be discussed further in the following sections. Bryman (1992:47) suggests:

One reason for the employment of a variety of techniques is that it allows inferences or leads drawn from one data source to be corroborated or followed up by another.

This was certainly the case in this study with the national survey being used to discover key themes, and inform the case study design. A number of findings from each stage of the research and from different participant groups are compared and contrasted across the finding's chapters, particularly where they highlighted a particular theme or pattern.

### *Interviews and focus groups*

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted using open-ended, 'non-directive' questions, and formed the main sources of evidence within this study (see Appendix D). May (1993:91) offers the following definition here:

The methods of entering and maintaining conversations with people and the theoretical interpretations which social researchers make as a result, constitute the fundamentals of interviews.

The advantages of this method were that it can provide a rich source of data regarding participants' feelings, experiences, aspirations and opinions (May, 1993), all of which were of value in relation to the topic of employability in this study. In addition, this format also provided the opportunity to challenge any preconceptions I may have had, given my previous and current involvement directly with the subject matter. Providing an opportunity to challenge any preconceived views was valuable, in terms of addressing any potential for bias. "Many interview studies seek to find out how a particular group of people perceive things" Silverman (2010:190). This is an explicit aim of this research, to determine how those working at both strategic and practice level understand, interpret and report how they currently address employability.

With employability being such a topical issue within HE, and an area of work that impacts on many people, there was the risk that interviewees may have provided answers that they believed the interviewer wanted to hear (Murray and Lawrence, 2000). From this perspective, focus groups presented an opportunity to hear a range of views simultaneously, and to observe similarities and differences between individuals. Walliman (2016:132) defines focus groups as:

...a type of group interview, which concentrates in-depth on a particular theme or topic with an element of interaction. This group is often made up of people who have particular experience of or knowledge about the subject of the research.

Running focus groups with academics and students directly connected with the undergraduate sports programmes presented a valuable opportunity to explore this topic in a slightly different way to the interviews.

In terms of how these sessions are best structured, Silverman (2010) recommends avoiding using research questions with respondents, as this may affect their responses, and can lead to what he calls, 'lazy research', where more detailed data analysis is simply replaced with merely describing what people have said during the interview. In practice, while there were certainly moments where participants would make comments to me, perhaps relating to a previous stance they may have expressed through our usual daily interactions, I managed to remain neutral and not

amplify these points, simply noting them down and ensuring the discussion remained on topic as required.

Further exploring the notion of potential bias, Strong (1979:229) states:

To suppose that any researcher enters a field without past experience or some pre-existing ideas is unrealistic. To suppose that their presence will not exert an influence on the data is equally unrealistic.

(cited in Silverman, 2010:29).

However, Hammersley (1990:8), cited in Silverman (2010:29), states “When a setting is familiar the danger of misunderstanding is especially great”. The concern here was that I might become too comfortable, as I was familiar with the setting and environment, and in this respect could miss important details of the events that were happening. Silverman (2010) describes this as *over-rapport* and so the importance of not taking everything that happens for granted and seeking to remain as critical as possible was essential. I believe I struck a positive balance in this respect, with enough confidence to be able to facilitate the sessions effectively, but at the same time ensuring the participants were fully engaged and participating in the areas of discussion that were most relevant. The audio from all sessions was recorded (securely saved) and then transcribed, to ensure no details within each session were missed (see Appendix E). Evidence of the subsequent coding that took place is also included in Appendices E and F.

Bryman (1992) and May (1993) discuss the potential issue of *rambling* and how to deal with it, depending on the type of interview being conducted. In a semi-structured interview, rambling may be of some value and may yield findings on an important new topic or concern raised by the interviewee. In a more structured interview, you may either allow the conversation to continue and make a note of anything that been missed, to pick back up again later, or immediately attempt to steer the interview back on track. In practice, this did not prove to be an issue in either the interviews or focus groups.

May (1993:94) goes on to state that a semi-structured interview:

...provides qualitative depth by allowing interviewees to talk about the subject in terms of their own 'frames of reference'. This allows the meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to events and relationships to be understood.

Again, this specifically relates to the aim of this research, to establish individuals' understanding and the meanings attached to employability within their own institutions and individual contexts, as either a leader setting strategy, or an academic working directly with students. Interviews and focus groups were employed with staff working at each institution, providing an opportunity to question those people directly involved with the employability agenda. Clearly there was potential to be a mismatch between how leaders and academics described their actions, and what was then experienced and subsequently reported by the students in practice. To explore this further, a number of focus groups were conducted with students at each case study institution, to ensure that these other key stakeholders, within the HE ecosystem had the opportunity to express their views, and therefore also allowing subsequent comparisons to be made across all stakeholders concerned and part of this employability delivery chain.

On occasion, additional questions were required in order to elicit more in-depth responses from students and to ascertain their true understanding, for example around the meaning of employability. Often these responses were brief and hard to interpret, for example "It's about having a set of skills" or "being a good person".

Offering further support for the selection of methods here, "Interviews represent possibly the most respectable data-gathering technique in qualitative approaches to social and educational research" according to Murray and Lawrence (2000:117). They go on to suggest that interviews are well-suited to explore topics in depth (Murray and Lawrence, 2000), which was the purpose of this study. Employability is a concept that is ever-present, yet the specific approaches to address this area of work are rarely articulated, therefore exploring this more in depth across the two institutions would provide a unique insight into examples of current practice in the sector.

The issues to consider to support best practice with interviews, according to Murray and Lawrence (2000:121), and many of which are also supported by May (1992), include:

- Prior to the interview, engage the respondent in casual small talk for a few minutes to establish a rapport.
- Assure the respondent that all information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.
- Avoid cross-examination. The interview venue is not a court room. Pause after the respondent has completed each answer to a question then follow up carefully if required.
- Do not contradict and do not argue against respondent views. It is not the prerogative of interviewers to make moral judgements about respondent answers.
- If a respondent appears threatened by a question pass over it or change the subject.
- Beware the leading question....

All these points clearly had relevance to this research, especially the importance of building rapport with the interviewee. May (1992) views this as a staged process of gradually building up trust and co-operation between the interviewer and interviewee. Spradley (1979), cited in May (1992:99) breaks this process down into four stages:

1. Descriptive questions which allow for more simple questions to be posed and answered in the first instance to help ease the interviewee into the actual interview process
2. Exploration where the interviewer and interviewee are learning a little more about what each other is like through the conversation
3. Co-operation where both parties then know what is expected of each other and
4. Participation, which may take several interactions over a period of time to arrive at this point.

I sought to be considerate of these stages throughout the case study stage of this research and did not experience any major challenges, beyond that already highlighted: the need to secure more in-depth responses from the student participants at times.

Throughout the research the methods, interviews and focus groups should be recorded and then transcribed (Murray and Lawrence, 2000 and Silverman, 2010). In terms of then conducting interviews and focus groups, the role that I played within each of the given methods employed, and how I might have potentially influenced the results has been acknowledged. For example, if within a given interview or focus group, I was already friends with one or more of the interviewees, it was important to remain impartial, and where this was not possible, at least consider how this may potentially have affected the interview process and outcomes. Given that there was an existing relationship between myself and several of the interviewees, it became essential to allow that person to speak freely, and to avoid any prompting, guiding or opportunities to offer a personal opinion, as I would normally have done in any other given conversation or situation with those same individuals. Here I needed to adopt a passive stance, with the aim of allowing the interview to flow and the individual to express their own opinions. This was certainly a challenge on occasion, given the nature of my work, where the focus had been to specifically try and persuade a number of these very same people to broaden their view of *employability* beyond the commonly narrow focus, often held.

In terms of defining questions to consider in semi-structured interviews and focus groups of the same type, it is likely that a set of questions would be prepared in advance, but these would only serve as a guide, with the interviewee/s being allowed to dictate the pace and direction of the responses, even if this means straying from the guidelines (Silverman, 2010). This flexibility enabled a fuller understanding of employability to be explored, using the interviewee's own language and terminology, which was critical to this study, rather than the individual's interpretations and opinions being restricted to a pre-set list of fixed questions and terminology taken from the literature and then used by the interviewer.

### *Case study samples*

I ran individual interviews with selected leaders within the two case study institutions, and then focus groups with the academics and students (see Appendix D). The leaders selected, based on availability, included the following positions: Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching, Academic Registrar, Head of the Sports Department and the Head of Careers and Employability. These positions were deemed to be most relevant to this thesis and its subject area, which was focused on undergraduate sports programmes and considering current understanding and interpretation of employability at both strategy and practice level.

Securing participants for both the leader interviews and academic focus groups did not prove to be problematic. I simply requested mixed gender groups of academics, with representatives from each level of study. Where possible I also requested multiple academics from within a single course to provide greater depth and insight. All interviews and focus groups were conducted face to face on campus (see Table 3).

All participants from the leader, academic and student samples were provided with an explanatory note about the study prior to their participation, and they all signed informed consent forms before taking part (See Appendix G). Confidentiality and anonymity were agreed for all participants, and all sessions were recorded and later transcribed for accuracy. All recordings and transcribed sessions were stored securely in password-protected files on my personal laptop, which itself was also password protected.

Securing participation from students in both institutions did present challenges. Academics at each of the case study institutions provided me with the initial contact details of a group of mixed gender students from the relevant programmes and from different levels of study. I then sent an introductory email and invited these groups to attend a choice of sessions on campus, the different options being to help increase the chances of securing sufficient participants.

Despite repeated direct emails to students over this planning period, numbers were relatively lower than hoped and therefore additional sessions were held to secure a better representative sample from each institution.

Eventually, broadly equal numbers of participants engaged in this study from each of the respective case study institutions.

### *Document review*

As has been previously discussed, the two case studies within this thesis allowed for a number of different methods to be used in combination, in order to provide findings from multiple sources, allowing potential for comparison and trends or patterns to be identified. Interviews and focus groups were used to question individuals and groups of respondents to be questioned about their understanding, interpretations and definitions of employability.

The final method used within this study was the document review which, at its simplest level, was a simple document analysis that enabled a view to be established of how employability as an area of work was articulated in key selected documents. Rapley (2018:124) describes this in terms of exploring a particular text and defines this as:

Exploring a text often depends as much focusing on what is said – and how a specific argument, idea or concept is developed – as well as focusing on what is not said – the silences, gaps or omissions

Certainly, this aligns with the primary motivation for including this particular method - to better understand how employability was articulated in a sample of the institutional documentation. What was missing from this text was also noted, which was of equal importance, when understanding and clarity were the main focus of this thesis.

Institutional strategy, the university websites and selected course specifications were of particular interest here, and their content was reviewed to ascertain where any explicit links to employability existed, and how exactly these references were articulated.

The potential volume of documentation associated with this aspect of the research was a serious consideration. With multiple sports programmes in each institution, each one having multiple modules at each level of study, the number of documents that may have been reviewed would have been extensive and ultimately unmanageable.



Therefore, this element of the research was limited, and while valuable, there is certainly the opportunity for future, more in-depth research in this particular area.

### *Coding and analysis*

According to Robson (2011:329) “Coding schemes contain predetermined categories for recording what is observed”, He suggests beginning with the research question in mind and then defining what concepts are important and the ways in which they can be measured.

In relation to the national survey, this involved using the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and the defined categories within that model, which collectively contribute towards employability. Whilst this formed the basis of the coding system for the national survey, there also needed to be flexibility to allow for additional areas to be noted, based on the input and understanding of the participants being observed. May (1993: 105) states:

In moving away from the structured format, it becomes necessary to employ techniques which can make some analytic ‘sense’ of the raw data. Conventional methods of achieving this involving the coding of open-ended replies in order to permit comparison.

The coding process was particularly important in this research, where terminology and the discourse captured around the area of employability could vary greatly from individual to individual. Manually coding the responses helped to achieve the desired level of clarity within the findings (see Appendices E and F). For example, an academic may have suggested *motivation* was key to employability and they may then in turn seek to address this directly with their students. *Motivation* is not an explicit component of the Career Edge model; however, it was essential to capture these additional areas of note, where they existed, with one of the aims of this research being to develop a more effective approach to employability in HEIs. Several of the components within the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), are relatively broad, such as *generic skills* and *experience work and life*. Walker (1985), cited in (Robson 2011), describes these as *category systems*, so rather than defining a long list of specific generic skills (such as communication, teamwork, leadership, organisational and

planning) the broader term of *generic skills* is used, and observations recorded on this basis. Fugate et al. (2004) also highlight grouping factors under more clustered headings when discussing the elements of their Psycho-Social model of employability.

Within this research there was an opportunity to utilise elements of both approaches to coding, with *category systems* used as the broader headings, under which specific points were then noted. In terms of recording, this made the process more manageable rather than continually referring to a long list, noting when a specific area had been mentioned and then noting the detail underneath each of the broader headings when later reviewing the final findings.

I was primarily interested in the frequency of specific areas that were noted from the national survey. In arriving at these results, the challenge was largely concerned with my own interpretation of the language used by those academics being associated with the relevant coding headings that were defined within the broader coding system. This is where my previous knowledge and expertise in employability was of value, in being able to make a judgement on where particular terminology was best recorded. In the case of the national survey, one additional category was added to the coding categories, to ensure all responses were considered.

### *Politics and ethics*

There were several ethical considerations within this study, and I needed to secure ethics approval at the two institutions where this PhD has been registered over its duration (see Appendices A and B). First, ethics approval was granted from Buckinghamshire New University prior to the national survey being conducted, and then by Northumbria University prior to the commencement of the case studies. Each institution had specific requirements that needed to be adhered to while conducting the research.

Looking at these requirements more broadly, there are a number of definitions within the literature, according to Robson (2011:198):

A distinction is sometimes made between ethics and morals. While both are concerned with what is good or bad, right or wrong, ethics are usually taken as referring to general principles of what one ought to do.

This knowing of what 'one ought to do' implies a level of experience and knowledge of the relevant situation and context. Similarly, Flew (1984:112) offers the following definition:

The word 'ethics' often suggests a set of standards by which a particular group or community decides to regulate its behaviour – to distinguish what is legitimate or acceptable in pursuit of their aims from what is not.

(cited in May, 1993:41)

Conducting this research has certainly been a learning opportunity, however my previous career and life experiences have developed me as an individual who believes that ethics and morals are central to our existence. There are 'certain ways' of doing things which are the accepted norm; being self-aware and aware of others is absolutely key in this respect, and understanding the impact of your behaviour and actions on others is fundamental to ethics. May (1993) calls this *philosophical ethics*.

Giving more specific consideration to the context of this research, the HE sector is extremely competitive, as institutions strive to secure student numbers. *Employability* as a theme of work is increasingly high on the agenda, and included in the marketing of specific courses as a potential differentiator from the competitors. Open days now provide the opportunity to quote the DLHE figures to prospective students and their families, with the percentages of students in graduate level employment six months post-graduation viewed as a significant measure of success by some. Questions from parents at open days often focus on these areas. It is considering this context that this research involved requesting access to institutions to establish how they were essentially *approaching employability*. This raised the question of whether institutions would be willing to share this information with someone who was based in a HEI themselves. Confidentiality and privacy were highlighted as key considerations, and the names of institutions and individuals included within the study have been kept anonymous. This is the norm when writing up research (Robson, 2011).

The underlying aim of this research was ultimately to be of benefit to the wider sector, with the intention that best practice could eventually be shared (Murray and Lawrence 2000). The hope was that this would be an attractive proposition for participating institutions and the individuals within the initial study, and to this extent I was relying on the goodwill of those institutions and participants in deciding to ultimately be involved, or not (Murray and Lawrence 2000).

Establishing relationships with key participants directly involved in the case studies was critical. Trust was needed if sufficient access was to be granted to review internal documentation, and approach staff and students. In order to establish these relationships, fully disclosing the intended methods, the overall purpose of the research - sometimes referred to as 'informed consent' - and demonstrating a competence in both the knowledge and application of research methods was key, and an ethical requirement from both institutions as well as a recommendation within the wider literature (Murray and Lawrence 2000, Robson 2011 and Silverman 2010), (see Appendix G).

Access was previously highlighted as a key consideration in the case study selection. As part of obtaining access and informed consent, it was important to acknowledge that the participants were all made aware of my professional background and area of expertise, through intentional disclosure and openness throughout. Full disclosure was a feature of my entire approach, and this helped with establishing a professional rapport with all participants (Silverman, 2010). Silverman (2010) goes on to suggest that previous experience on the part of the researcher may actually be advantageous in terms of being a source of relevant expertise, and fellow academics participating in the research may find these engagements positive and worthwhile.

Murray and Lawrence (2000:19) highlight the importance of thorough consideration being given to the ethical aspects of the research by stating "Certainly practitioners and tutors need to be particularly careful when conducting educational research". The potential impact on the learning environment and students must be given consideration - the overall interests and welfare of the students and academics as subjects of the research must take priority over the needs of the researcher (Murray and Lawrence, 2000).

The research context is also a consideration here: doing what is right in any given situation (Robson, 2011). These authors go on to highlight the importance of the researcher taking an honest approach throughout the study, with a view to being as objective as possible throughout, and fully acknowledging the contribution of others within the research process. I certainly sought to be as honest and transparent as possible with all participants, to ensure they were all well aware of what was involved at every stage of the process. Walliman (2016) highlights the value of honesty here in establishing trust with others.

In relation to case studies, Stake (1995) suggests that approval from your own internal ethics board may not be enough to protect participants, and that when adopting this approach, the researcher “needs to think through the ethics of (a) situation and to take the necessary steps...” (Stake, 1995:58). Therefore, a broad-based ethical approach needed to remain at the forefront of my thinking at each stage of the research process. This also links to the point raised earlier, where sometimes decisions needed to be made that were specific and appropriate for the situation. Whilst the ethics processes in place at institutional level were a consistent consideration throughout, acting in an appropriate and ethical manner was fundamentally always the priority.

## **Summary**

Through this study of current practice at both a strategic and practice level, using the methods outlined in this chapter, the aim was to establish current understanding and interpretations of employability amongst leaders, academics and students. The findings of this research would then be utilised to inform the development of a framework / model that could underpin more effective future approaches to employability within undergraduate sports programmes.

The methods outlined provided the means through which I could gain insight into how participants from a number of institutions currently understand, interpret and address employability, with a particular focus on their sports degree programmes. This would then provide the opportunity to compare and contrast these interpretations and approaches to those articulated in published employability research.

The findings of this research will not only benefit the sports departments within these universities, the approaches identified and articulated have potential value to other subject areas too. The sports degree programmes permit the illumination of employability in practice within an HEI; sports degree subjects may have provided the overall context for this research, but the findings potentially have a far wider reach than sport alone.

The following two chapters present the findings of this research. The first chapter presents the findings of the national survey with academics and the leader's sample from across both case study institutions. The second findings chapter then outlines the results of the academic samples from both case studies, together with the findings from the student participant sample.

## Chapter 5

# Findings from the national survey and leader sample

### Introduction

This chapter will first outline the findings of the national survey, which was conducted with academics prior to the case studies. This is included here as it directly informed the design and delivery of the subsequent case studies. Secondly, the chapter will explore how institutions interpret employability at a strategic level, as reported by the selected leaders at the two case study institutions. The case studies also included a review of key documentation, which is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Consideration throughout the chapter was given to addressing and answering the following research questions:

1. How is employability understood at a strategic and practice level?
2. Is there a connection between both levels of understanding (strategic and practice) and how is this reported to manifest itself within sports degree programmes?

The key findings of this section are that in the discourse from both leaders and academics, *employability* and *employment* are used interchangeably, demonstrating clear similarities between strategic and practice levels. Commonly, DLHE is reported as the driver in focusing attention specifically on employment as the perceived measure of success in relation to employability. In addition, a clear focus on the skills that are perceived to support the individual in relation to securing employment is also evident.

Within the academic sample captured through the national survey and the leader sample, there are similarities between the responses of individuals who have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of employability that more closely aligns

with the literature around employability. However, there was no real acknowledgment of the conceptual models of employability previously published and discussed in Chapter 3 (Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Kumar, 2007, and Tomlinson, 2017a), by either the leaders or academics who were participants in this study.

Overall, across both the strategic and practice levels, there is no real sense of clarity about what *employability* is and how to deliver it, which results in inconsistencies in the discourse and how it is articulated, highlighting the complexity involved in seeking to measure and address it in a meaningful way.

At times, employability is viewed as a disconnected and discrete area of work by a number of leaders, rather than being an integral feature of the overall student experience, and a critical consideration for any institutional approach to learning and teaching more broadly.

From a positive perspective, it should be acknowledged that University A had previously acted to embed employability in their institutional quality assurance processes, although the reported impact of this work is limited. University B, at a strategic level, has taken action to integrate employability into its institutional learning and teaching agenda via a university-wide curriculum design process. This attempt to better integrate these complex strategic agendas has clearly had an impact, but this has not yet been fully realised with all participants, with some individuals still viewing employability as distinct and an addition to core learning and teaching activities, rather than being a key feature and part of the overall purpose of higher education.

### **Results from the national survey of undergraduate sports programme academics**

The national survey was conducted in the first stage of this research, providing a broad overview of the opinions of academics teaching undergraduate sports programmes in institutions across the UK. The results of the national survey were subsequently used to inform the design of the case studies - specifically, the questions that were asked as part of the interviews and focus groups. It is with this direct link that the survey findings provide an additional source for consideration, alongside the findings of the case studies.



The primary question considered in the national survey was asking academics to define employability. The findings were then manually coded against a selected model of employability in order to directly respond to one of the main research aims, which was to reflect on current understanding and interpretations of employability in relation to the employability research and conceptual models. From this perspective it was decided that utilising Career Edge by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), one of the models reviewed in Chapter 3, would be advantageous. Using this model helped to establish a view of how academics' understanding and the resulting discourse associated with employability, directly related to components of this conceptual model. This would provide valuable insight into how close, or potentially far away, academic views were from this published and well-regarded model (over 60,000 downloads from Emerald Publishing). Career Edge provided a point of reference, acting as a benchmark to consider participants' responses against and instantly enabling a view to be determined on how narrow or broad their understanding and the resulting discourse was in comparison. Other models could have been used for comparison purposes, but the readily understandable language and the similarities with other models highlighted in Chapter 3 was considered to justify the use of Career Edge (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007) for this stage of the research.

While already detailed in the literature review chapter, the model is presented here as a reminder, together with a definition of each of the terms used within the model.

*Figure 7: Career Edge model, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007)*



### *Key – Definitions of the elements of the model*

*Career Development Learning (CDL)*: CV writing, interview preparation and technique, action planning, labour market intelligence; knowledge of graduate employment options and understanding of the current employment situation and the changing nature of professions.

*Experience (Work and Life) (EWL)*: Paid, voluntary, work placement, work-related learning, ability to transfer learning, skills and experience from the classroom to work and back again, flexibility and adaptability, working with peers, colleagues, clients and customers.

*Degree Subject Knowledge Understanding and Skills (KUS)*: Understanding the key areas of knowledge and skills developed through the study of own subject / discipline (e.g. subject benchmarks and National Occupational Standards) as well as the contexts where such knowledge and skills might be used; recognising differences between subjects / disciplines.

*Generic Skills (GS)*: 'The skills which can support study in any discipline, and which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts, in higher education or the workplace.' e.g. willingness to learn, teamwork, communication, independent working, adaptability, creativity.

*Emotional Intelligence (EI)*: 'The capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.' Working in varied peer groups in different situations and contexts. Listening, empathy, self-awareness and social awareness.

*Reflection and Evaluation (RE)*: Understanding own learning including recognizing learning styles, meta-cognition (awareness of how one develops) and appropriate use of learning logs, critical incident analysis, learning journals etc; recognition that people learn differently and see things from diverse perspectives.

*Self-esteem, Self-confidence and Self-efficacy (S)*: Understanding the links between these three closely linked areas and links with knowledge, understanding, skills,

experience and personal attributes and employability. Demonstrates malleable self-theory, recognize and articulate personal success.

*Additional category*

*Employment / Job (E/J)*: Where reference was made by respondents to either 'employment' or gaining a job.

To capture the full range of responses from participants in the national survey, an eighth additional category *Employment / Job (E/J)* was added for the purpose of this coding exercise. The findings from the survey were all coded manually, and the individual academic responses were then combined and presented on a per institution basis, as shown in Table 5. Presenting the findings in this way provides insight into the relative strength of particular views within each of the sports departments at each university. The figures are displayed as percentages of the total academic sample from each individual institution that referred to each of the defined categories from Career Edge (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). By combining the individual academic responses from each institution, it has been possible to then highlight the more commonly held views and interpretations that existed amongst the academics in each university sample. For example, in Table 5, University 5, 100% of the academics who responded to the survey referred to employability being concerned with graduates securing a job, and therefore specifically related the term to employment.

*Table 5: Current understanding and interpretations of employability at an institutional level*

University	Career Edge Category							Additional Category
	Career Development Learning (% of academics)	Experience Work and Life (% of academics)	Knowledge Understanding Skills (% of academics)	Generic Skills (% of academics)	Emotional Intelligence (% of academics)	Reflection and Evaluation (% of academics)	Self - confidence / efficacy / esteem (% of academics)	Employment / Job (% of academics)
1	0	0	27.27	81.81	9.09	0	0	90.90
2	0	10	30	50	20	0	20	80
3	33.33	16.67	50	83.33	16.67	16.67	16.67	66.67
4	0	0	50	75	0	0	50	75
5	0	0	0	66.67	0	0	0	100
6	0	0	50	0	0	50	50	50
7	0	50	0	100	0	0	0	100
8	0	50	0	100	0	0	0	100
9	50	50	50	100	0	0	0	50
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
11	0	0	100	100	0	0	0	100
12	50	50	100	100	0	0	0	100
13	0	0	0	50	0	0	0	100
14	0	0	50	100	0	50	0	50
15	0	0	50	50	0	0	0	100

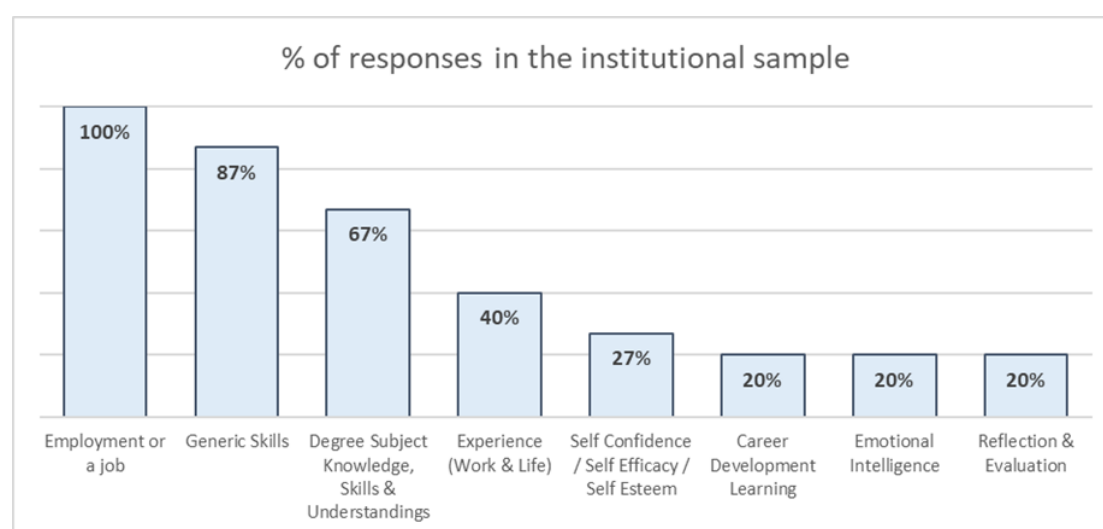
The figures presented in this table indicate the percentage of academics at each of the fifteen individual institutions, where responses could be coded against the seven categories from the Career Edge model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), plus the eighth additional category created for the purpose of the coding exercise.

To help illustrate the relative strength of these academic views and the understanding of employability at each institution, where at least a single positive response from an academic was captured, this has been highlighted in green. This provides a convenient overview of the spread of responses from within each institutional sample, viewing the table horizontally across each row, and provides a clearer view of how narrow or broad the understanding of employability was amongst the academic respondents from each institution.

There was also an interest in understanding these results from the perspective of a wider sector (sample-based) view, considering the findings across the combined sports departments, and their understanding of employability collectively. By combining the responses from each of the individual institutions in Table 5, it was possible to establish the most prevalent views of employability amongst the entire survey sample. When viewing the results in Table 5 vertically, the columns with most green shading equate to the most commonly-held sector understanding of employability.

The following chart presents these most common responses, considering the combined results across the whole sample, as an indication of a representative sector held view and understanding of employability:

**Chart 1: Sports departments combined sector-level understanding of employability (n=15 institutions)**



*Chart 1: Results Summary (n=15)*

- 20% of institutions included references to *Career Development Learning*
- 40% of institutions included references to *Experience (Work and Life)*
- 67% of institutions included reference to *Degree Subject Knowledge, Skills and Understandings*
- 87% of institutions included references to *Generic Skills*
- 20% of institutions included references to *Emotional Intelligence*

- 20% of institutions included references to *Reflection and Evaluation*
- 27% of institutions included references to *Self Confidence / Self Efficacy / Self Esteem*
- 100% of institutions included references to *Employment or a job*

The most commonly cited interpretation of employability by academics responding to the national survey, when viewed at both institutional level and sector level, was that employability was concerned primarily with *skills* (87% of the total sector sample) and *securing a job* (100% of the total sector sample), when referenced against the Career Edge model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007).

When viewing the combined results across the entire sample shown in Table 5, academics from 11 of the 15 institutions, defined employability using terminology that, fell into four or fewer categories from the total of eight available. This suggests a more focused and limited understanding and lexicon amongst these academic samples. Only one institution's academics used language that could be coded across all eight categories. This suggests a much broader level of understanding and subsequently discourse, and one that is then ultimately more closely aligned with how employability is defined in the research (e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

The lack of clarity that exists around employability is highlighted below, with one academic survey participant stating:

Sporadically it's mentioned in the marketing and in the rhetoric and there is a specific scheme that is supposed to help students enhance their employability. However, I'm not sure how much understanding of the term exists amongst the people who run the initiative!

Academic, national survey, 2015

There are clearly implications for how employability is currently understood and interpreted and the resulting discourse. The skills focus that emerges from these findings has already been challenged in Chapter 2 and within the literature, for example by Cole and Hallett (2019), Higdon (2016), Holmes (2001) and Tomlinson

(2017a). The link between skills and employment, however, was commonly observed, particularly in practice, where academics placed an emphasis on the need for students to gain practical work experience for this very reason.

### ***Summary of the key survey findings***

#### **1. Limited understanding and narrow interpretations and discourse around employability**

The findings of the national survey indicated that there was limited understanding and narrow interpretation in the discourse around employability and in relation to the Career Edge model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). The importance of understanding employability and how this is interpreted and articulated is highlighted as one of the key findings of the survey, particularly due to the potential it has to influence the understanding of students and their resulting actions in practice. An academic's understanding is likely to impact on the range of opportunities that are developed and provided for students to support their future employability. Commonly, skills to support employment was the dominant term articulated in the understanding and discourse observed amongst the academic samples.

#### **2. Lack of alignment between the understanding of employability and the conceptual models**

The second key finding is how commonly there was a lack of engagement with the body of work where employability has been conceptually defined (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Kumar, 2007 and Tomlinson, 2017a) by the sampled academics. Current understanding and the resulting approaches could therefore be said to be not informed by research.

The level of understanding and the interpretations of employability demonstrated in this research partly contribute to the challenge of engaging stakeholders in developing more effective approaches. The lack of a shared understanding and meaning from the outset raises questions such as: *What are we doing exactly? Why are we doing this?* And: *who is responsible?* The underpinning research provides answers to each of these questions.

An example of this lack of clarity is illustrated in the following survey response:

All undergraduate courses must have a career planning agreement which maps transferable skills acquired throughout the course. Other than that university has a laissez faire approach i.e. just let the careers service get on with it.

Academic, national survey, 2015

This highlights how this academic, when questioned about employability, perceives that *careers* and *skills* are the areas of focus, with specific requirements that all programmes must address. Beyond this, suggesting there is a lack of any further institutional clarity and it is left to the Careers Service.

Another academic respondent supported this view:

Employability is embedded into all modules, there is a heavy emphasis on providing employability skills and ensuring the students can access job opportunities.

Academic, national survey, 2015

This highlights the ambiguity that exists in the discourse amongst academics in the sample. What exactly are these *employability skills*? Are they different to transferable or generic skills? Finally, whatever these skills are perceived to be, are they at least made explicit to students, so that they might understand and then recognise what they are and how they might be developed further? The findings suggest that with a lack of consensus this level of detail was often absent in the resulting discourse.

Supporting the need for a richer and more diverse discourse on employability in relation to sports undergraduates, Minten (2010:72) states:

The graduates' performance tended to be attributed to their personality and a clear pattern of strengths emerged across them: good interpersonal skill, initiative, a positive attitude, ability to work hard, commitment and having past relevant experiences.



This highlights the importance of being specific with students regarding the particular capabilities and qualities that are expected of them. Going beyond the lexicon of skills and into a more detailed and nuanced discourse would potentially improve student engagement, as they could then be much clearer on the benefits of engaging with a range of learning opportunities. Currently students may be signposted to various learning activities, but may not understand their true purpose and value: what the potential outcomes would be of engaging their efforts in these activities, and the value to their futures. This could be addressed in practice by engaging with the work of Biggs and Tang (2011) through *constructive alignment* and Scott (2016b) with the *flipped curriculum*, where the outcome of the learning is the initial consideration in the curriculum design process, before more thought is given to how these areas might best be developed in practice.

Overall, the findings from academics in the national survey demonstrate an understanding and resulting discourse associated with employability, dominated by a skill-based focus, primarily for the purpose of securing initial employment. These findings are significant, as they align with the dominant national focus, as articulated by government in the policy documents outlined in Chapter 1 and 2. Thanks to their high-profile nature, the associated metrics, and DHLE in particular, appear to have also directly influenced the understanding and views expressed by academics in this sample, with students' first destination employment considered the priority. The findings from surveying academics present a useful backdrop to the following sections, which outline how employability is understood and articulated in key institutional documentation, and detail the responses from participants who held leadership roles within their respective institutions. This highlights the relationship between strategy and practice and responds to that particular research aim of this thesis.

### **Strategic documentation review**

The following section explores how employability is positioned within an institution at a strategic level, and how strategy is then articulated through a range of key documents and sources, including marketing and institutional-level documentation.

## University A

The documentation reviewed from University A expresses their strategic intent slightly differently to University B:

Our vision is simple. We want to become a leading university for professional and creative education and applied research. That's why we are carefully developing our course portfolios to make sure they are what students need and will help them on the way to fulfilling employment.

.... For education, we are crafting accessible university learning to transform lives and nurture the abilities in our graduates to change the world. We want to stretch and challenge our students to succeed and will build strong partnerships with organisations to give our students unprecedented opportunities.

University A, website, March 2018

These initial messages are clear, with a focus on *professional and creative education and applied research* and with an explicit statement that there is a commitment to support students through to *employment*. Whether there is an appreciation of the need for an additional *employability* underpinning to support these aspirations is not clear at this point.

In University A, the terms *employment* and *employability* are not used interchangeably. On their website, University A is clear that they are focused on supporting students into employment. The language employed by University A is worth noting here, with an explicit focus and the headline message concerned with securing a job. While this is clearly important, it raises the question, is this the sole purpose of HE? And when a job is no longer for life, is this first step looking far enough ahead? This tension is clearly not something that is specific just to University A. Most of the sector is actively seeking to respond to the employment metrics and resulting league tables. Careers services became Careers and Employability Services, with Directors of Employability being appointed as a response to a renewed focus on DLHE and Graduate Outcomes. With this department tasked with improving the employment outcomes, the challenge presented in practice is that the team is normally not large enough to engage all

students. Nor is it necessarily qualified to address all aspects of employability required to support students across a range of subject areas, no individual can effectively cover all that is required.

Overall, in seeking to avoid possible misinterpretations of specific institutional priorities, the narrative employed in key documents and resources becomes a critical consideration for all institutions.

Looking in more depth at University A's Strategy 2016-2021, the opening text states:

We already have a deserved reputation for being a supportive and welcoming learning community. Our challenge is to ensure that the quality of our teaching, research and enterprise and employability are equally recognised.

University A, strategic plan, 2016-2021

Here the term *employability* is presented, but with no real distinction from the focus on employment expressed previously. University A then goes on to detail their aspirations for supporting a student's future success.

Student success

- Develop a course portfolio at all levels that is attractive to applicants, sector engaged and leads to excellent graduate outcomes and employment.
- Create the conditions for student success through a leading-edge, employment focused curriculum, with recognised excellence evidenced across the University in teaching and in learning support.

University A, strategic plan, 2016-2021

Here, the focus on *student success* aligns with *employment*, rather than *employability*, demonstrating a consistent but restrictive narrative being employed by University A. At times, the terms *employment* and *employability* are used interchangeably, and this is further illustrated within the education strand of University A's Strategic Plan, 2016-2021. While alluding to *employability* throughout, the plan does not use the word itself beyond a single instance in the introduction. Instead, it switched seamlessly into an

overt and fixed narrative using on *employment*, *graduate level employment* and *graduate attributes* as the preferred terminology throughout the rest of the document.

### *University B*

The following text is from the second case study institution's website, and outlines their strategic vision:

[The institution] ... is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence.

Our ambition is to be in the top 30 of UK universities. ....is transforming to become a new kind of excellent university. To achieve this transformation, between 2013 and 2018 we will:

- Build global reputation, market position and revenue streams
- Grow high quality research and use it to drive excellence in all of our activities
- Maximise student and stakeholder satisfaction
- Strengthen operational efficiency and effectiveness and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

University B, website, March 2018

This narrative has a strong focus on research, with an indication that the institution also wants to be seen as being business-focused. Reviewing the same institution's corporate strategy 2013-2018, provides further detail. In the first of these statements it highlights:

Our graduates are distinguished by their intellectual expertise and prowess, their leadership capability and their employability.

University B, corporate strategy, 2013-18 online

This signals very clearly that *employability* is seen as an integral part of the institution's strategic vision. In addition, the vision expresses how the institution will operate, under the following principle:

Partnership working is a stylistic trait that creates mutual gains in reputation and sustainability at home and overseas and is the basis for our interactions with the world of business.

University B, corporate strategy, 2013-18 online

This flags that the institution will require staff to not only have *employability* at the forefront of their minds in how they should be supporting students, but also that they should be engaging externally with industry as part of this work. To address the institutional vision, their corporate strategy details several actions that the institution will commit to, including “Increase the proportion of .... graduates in professional employment or graduate further study.” University B, corporate strategy, 2013-18 online.

This highlights a dual focus, one that fixes on both *employment* and *employability*, signalling that the institution is taking both seriously. But do all staff understand the differences? Further evidence of this commitment can be observed in the *Student Learning and Experience Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18* from University B, which outlines the key milestones that will mark the successful delivery of the Corporate Strategy. The first KPI is included below.

Proportion of leavers in graduate employment or further study six months after graduating.

Student satisfaction and employability are the two KPIs for the Student Learning and Experience plan. They are supported by measures of retention and academic achievement that, along with satisfaction and employability, contribute significantly to league table performance.

University B, Student learning and experience strategic plan, 2013/14-2017/18

Here we see the two terms, *employment* and *employability* again being used interchangeably and similarly to University A. Employability is stated as a KPI when, in reality, a single measure of employability does not exist. Overall, this is communicating to staff at the institution that success in addressing *employability*, as

cited in the Strategic Plan, is measured by an *employment*-based metric. This reflects the same narrative commonly articulated at national level, as reported in Chapters 1 and 2. This influence is reflected in the views articulated by staff throughout this findings chapter and the next, where reference is commonly made to DLHE as a direct measure of success in relation to employability. The problem here lies in the narrow lens through which the employability agenda is being viewed. Meaning many key learning activities which are equally important to support longer-term employability may not be truly valued, as they are not recognised through this current metric. This highlights the importance of not only acknowledging first destinations and early employment, but to also planning activity that looks beyond this timeframe, supporting students to be equipped for life beyond this initial stage, post-graduation.

In addition, this previous statement from University B, demonstrates an appreciation for the relationship between student satisfaction, employability, learning and teaching, and retention and attainment. Recognising these synergies is certainly to be commended.

Later in University B's strategic plan, employability is further discussed. This includes some reflection on the current institutional strengths and weaknesses, with future actions identified. Several points emerge from within this text, and are paraphrased below:

- Reference is made to performance in the employment league tables
- Resourcing of the Careers Service is highlighted
- The curriculum is highlighted and how employability is addressed within it
- Specific reference is made to placements and outward mobility
- The need to share best practice across the institution is flagged

Collectively, these are valuable considerations that add richness to the narrative shared with employees at this institution, a depth that may be suggested to be sometimes lacking elsewhere. These points begin to stretch potential interpretations of employability beyond job acquisition and beyond it being the sole responsibility of the Careers Service. They start to position employability as an area of work that should be embedded throughout the curriculum and beyond, with the support of Professional Services. This also supports the value of developing students' outward mobility

through a variety of learning experiences. These additional learning opportunities are all critical considerations if a broader and more holistic, research-aligned view of employability is desired as part of an institutional approach. The challenge this presents is ensuring all stakeholders – including students - are not only aware of which areas of learning individually are important, but also why, and finally how these combine to ultimately support their future success. This might best be achieved through a more focused narrative of learning outcomes or objectives (Biggs and Tang, 2011), where the purpose of engaging with each area of learning is made clear from the outset.

This also highlights that when there is such a diverse range of activities supporting employability, the DLHE data is clearly not ever going to be a true representation of progress and the achievements made in each area of work. A more nuanced combination of metrics may provide a more accurate overview of how an institution is performing in relation to its broader employability provision.

Having established an overview of how employability is articulated in key documentation at a strategic level, the following section examines the understanding of employability and resulting discourse amongst the leader sample.

### **Institutional leaders**

According to Blackwell and Edmonson (2016), stakeholders in HE currently view employment outcomes as important, particularly due to their prominence in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This paper signals a renewed emphasis on existing employment measures. TEF has since evolved to become the *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework*, with employment outcomes being the most heavily weighted of the three metrics it includes. Evidence of the influence of this employment metric was apparent amongst the leader sample, and will be further explored in the following sections. The development of the OfS and with its interest in ensuring students receive value for money from their higher education experience, meant that DLHE (as was, now Graduate Outcomes) instantly became a priority for this new government-funded agency.

Following these changes at national policy level, the views expressed in both the findings of the national survey and by several leaders in the case studies relating to the metrics as drivers of thinking, policy and practice, may not be considered surprising.

Employment metrics are a mandatory feature within the Key Information Statistics (KIS) that all institutions are required to provide by HEFCE (now OfS), and which are amplified by the media, as highlighted by Blackwell and Edmonson (2016:44) who state:

Newspaper league tables (published annually by Times Higher Education, Guardian, The Sunday Times and others) have included employment metrics for years, all slightly different, but derived from the same source, the annual Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey of recent graduates.

As part of this research, several leaders and academics referred to these metrics as specific measures of employability. Given the perceived connection between league table performance and institutional reputation, these particular metrics could be described as drivers of the current understanding and resulting interpretations of employability. The issue here is then exacerbated by the conversion of DLHE survey results into league tables, by organisations such as The Guardian, The Times and high-profile websites, which rank all universities on their performance. This issue will now be explored further.

### *The impact of the metrics*

The national employment metrics are perceived to have a direct influence on institutional reputation. This is illustrated by quotations from university leaders in the two case studies, when asked about their institutions approach to employability:

That it matters, that it is something we've got to embrace. The government has created a market. So just from a purely practical fact, why wouldn't we want to be further up the league tables? Surely that's got to be desirable. So, it does matter.



Leader, University A, case study 2016

This is reflected in observations by Blackwell and Edmonson (2016), who highlight the 'high stakes' now attached to these metrics. Another senior leader at University A offered the view that:

The institution has been fairly internally referenced and doesn't use data in its day to day discourse. So that leads to rather lazy thinking. Data itself and the available evidence can itself be a driver, I think, for the sorts of change around employability that you want to make. So, giving people their position, making people look at their position relative to the same discipline that they're offering in other institutions...

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

This view makes explicit reference to the use of data and the perceived value that it holds as a potential driver of staff thinking and behaviours. This relationship will be considered in Chapter 6.

The following feedback adds to the perceived connections between DLHE data and employability made by leaders in this sample:

Employability is a priority but along with all the other stuff. I get flagged on things at quarterly business meetings. I don't think our employability figures are too bad. It's just in terms of sports students and I think they've actually recently gone up. So, I think our employability figures are good for sports science and sport programmes. Generally, I get flagged on other things. Things like attrition. 'Student attrition'. What are you doing about that?... Researching contract income. 'What are you going to do about researching contract income?' So, for the faculty level, there are bigger priorities for me. I'm not saying employability isn't a priority because it is. It's one of the KPIs and it's on the red, amber, green thing. But I get held up about other things ahead of employability. So, I'm assuming that employability is acceptable for our students.

Leader, University B, case study 2016

This is a good example of how DLHE and employment data is viewed and described as *employability figures*. If this is the understanding demonstrated in an interview, it could be assumed that a similar level of understanding and resulting discourse occurs with the teaching team that this leader is responsible for. This is problematic, as perceived performance in one area (employability) is being associated with actual performance in a different area (employment). Essentially, employment data is being used as a proxy for employability and this requires further consideration (Bridgstock, 2009). This quotation also highlights how employability sits alongside several other strategic priorities, so the amount of attention that can be dedicated to employability is put into question. In the last line, this leader states that they 'assume' employability is acceptable. The DLHE data may be acceptable, but this does not automatically mean that the approach to employability cannot and should not be further enhanced.

Why does all this matter? As discussed, the two terms (*employability* and *employment*) are related but not the same (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007 and Hawkins, 1999,). If the focus of leaders remains primarily on first destination employment, which is so closely linked to institutional reputation, strategic- level decisions by leaders will be designed to support students in gaining that first job. As a result, the provision of careers education, including CV advice, interview and assessment centre preparation and the inclusion of some aspect of work-related learning, is likely to feature prominently in any subsequent targeted activity.

The assertion of this thesis is that the focus should be on *employability*, and therefore the understanding and interpretation of this concept by leaders in institutions is critical, as the associated learning opportunities required to underpin it are not exactly the same to those needed for *employment*. The two terms are often used interchangeably, as demonstrated by the findings and supported by my own experience of working within HE for twelve years. I receive regular emails from conference organisers, such as Inside Government, Westminster Forum, Understanding Modern Government, Advance HE and Universities UK, and none of these employability-focused events are designed to target institutional leaders. This raises the question of how a leader's understanding of employability might evolve or be influenced in the absence of such opportunities?

With a focus on employability, rather than just employment, might support future learning provision to evolve to become more about how students are supported to embark on their career and lives more broadly, equipped not only with knowledge and experience in the areas highlighted above (careers education), but also with a broader grounding, with learning that supports the development of the qualities and dispositions that are essential to their lives on a daily basis which careers educators certainly contribute to, but cannot do alone.

From the evidence gathered throughout this study, the influence of the metrics on narrowing understanding and the resulting discourse of employability with leaders is a key consideration, if the desire is to develop more effective future approaches. With reputation a significant and constant consideration for university leaders, the current metrics, in the absence of a more suitable alternative, provide the only means by which performance in 'employability' might be evaluated. As stated previously, given that these employment-based metrics are - at best - a proxy for employability, this highlights the urgent need for additional metrics in the future. Such metrics should consider the value of a much wider range of learning related inputs, activities and their potential impact on student outcomes. All of this is necessary if there is ever going to be an opportunity to positively influence leaders' understanding of employability, and what matters most, in order to support and develop a more effective future strategic approach.

#### *Translating current understanding of employability to practice*

How individuals speak about employability can potentially impact directly on subsequent practice. Schwandt (2003), cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2003), highlights how, with an interpretive perspective, a specific human action is inherently meaningful, suggesting that an individual's views and interpretations of a specific topic will guide the subsequent practices they adopt in order to address that subject. This demonstrates how meaning is translated into practice. This is particularly relevant to this section of the thesis, when considering the understanding and interpretation of employability by leaders and the subsequent impact that this may have on the thinking and practice of others.

Whilst the following quotation suggests a relatively well-informed view of employability, translating it into practice would be complex. The questions remain, will these views be shared by others, and if so, how?

So, I think when I refer to employability in dialogue with students particularly, I will tend to mean that I am talking about the development of their overall capabilities and their assets and their strengths that are going to be required, whether that's skills, knowledge, understanding, behavioural attributes – it's multi-faceted. But essentially, it's their capabilities that will enable them to be successful throughout their lives in whatever they choose to do.

Leader, University A, case study 2016

This understanding of employability certainly stretches the narrative beyond being simply around skills and a single job. The views of this leader paint a vivid picture of the variety of qualities and capabilities that are important and supports a more comprehensive view of the concept of employability. However, each of the aspects mentioned is complex, so without further clarification, they are likely to remain as abstract concepts, ambiguous and open to interpretation by others.

This is where the conceptual models of employability e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a), become of significant value, providing specific examples of the combinations of potentially learned capabilities required to support students to be successful in their chosen occupation, and in life more broadly.

The leader from University B below demonstrates that there may be individuals already within the institution who have a more developed conceptual understanding of the area of employability:

Employability, it's more than skills, it's not just employment. This is about attitudes, attributes. It could be some skills. It's about knowledge, it's about a plan, about progression, and as an individual, having all those different elements that make you employable, that make you employable into a real wide variety of locations, employment situations. Actually, it's not just about that

employed by someone else, it's about that you could start up your own business, you could do portfolio work, and you could do a range of things... It's not necessarily about employability in that sense. This is about developing yourself as an individual and making you an active participant in the local, regional, national, global economy.

Leader, University B, case study 2016

This more holistic view of employability highlights the need to consider more than just skills and states the importance of attitude. It moves the focus onto the broader range of human qualities and dispositions that are equally important. It also considers the opportunities for self-employment and enterprise, not only from the employment perspective signalled by the DLHE statistics. This might be considered a more fluid view of employability, as opposed to a rigid and more restrictive one. Both these quotations signal a level of understanding that is certainly positive, yet in both cases, more work is required to translate these views into practice. In addition, these more sophisticated views were certainly not reflected as the norm across the leader sample, with varying levels of understanding of employability being expressed. Consistency is however clearly important, particularly if considering how to establish a more effective institutional level and strategic approach to employability in the future.

The reality of attempting to derive shared meaning in this strategic area of work is illustrated by the following leader:

But of course, you're still as part of the role immersed or surrounded by various changes and when employability first started gaining traction as a particularly important aspect of the higher education experience then yeah, there'll be meetings that you'll be developing definitions and understandings around, there'll be conferences, there will be internal meetings and discussions where you're sense making collectively, really, about our interpretations of what it means.

Leader, University A, case study 2016

This highlights a scenario where understanding and interpretations are developed locally within the institution. The questions this raises are, what level of expertise is directly involved in these discussions, and what supporting literature is influencing the thinking and views of individuals involved in these meetings and discussions? Are these discussions detached from the existing body of literature, and specifically the conceptual models of employability? The findings of this study suggest that in practice, these participant views are disconnected from the conceptual models of employability. For example, as most commonly articulated in the findings of the national survey, employability is associated with being a set of skills that are required to gain employment, yet:

Holmes (2001) argues, “despite the considerable body of literature resistant to this approach (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000), it continues to be promoted in policy, at national and institutional level” (p. 112).

(cited in Cole and Hallett, 2019:121)

In this way, the perceived need for skills in practice becomes the desired outcome, which is in line with how the government, media, some employers and many working in HE today articulate their responses to the employability agenda. However, this focus has been challenged in the literature by several authors over a number of years (Barnett, 1994, Bridges, 1992 and Wolf, 1991 cited in Holmes, 2001). Therefore, the fundamental question remains, whether this focus is on the correct areas for future development? Although simplistic, the following section highlights the current reality. If learning opportunities are created to develop skills, while what is really needed is to develop attitude, the chances of being successful in developing attitude will clearly be limited.

### *A disconnected agenda*

At the time of the research, University B was embedding an innovative and research-informed strategic approach to employability in their quality assurance and learning and teaching processes. Despite this deliberate move to embed employability more effectively within the curriculum, the purpose of doing so is still not fully understood by everyone, as demonstrated by participants in this study, and this highlights one of the

key findings of this research. Employability is viewed as a disconnected and discrete area of work, and supplementary to the core business of higher education, that is, learning, teaching and research. Evidence of this disconnect is notable within the leader sample, due to the potential impact it may then have on the subsequent understanding and actions of others tasked with delivering with students. This leader expressed the following views in defining employability:

For me, I think employability is an important facet of what we're trying to achieve here. But there's more to a degree than that, I would hope. The experience of it all and the way that people mature and grow up and become adults and are able to manage their time and all that. I guess they all transfer to employability, but employability is one important component, but I would hope that a degree is much more than that. For some people, it's not about employability, is it? It's about personal aspiration of achieving something.

Leader, University B, case study 2016

Clearly there are positives here, and this leader recognises the importance of employability. However, viewing employability as being something separate to the degree: an area of work that is additional to the subject being studied rather than being part of it and interwoven throughout the course of study and beyond. This is problematic. If, for example, this individual's understanding of employability primarily relates to employment, and more specifically gaining a job, then the sentiments expressed here are logical. However, as already established, employability is much broader and centres around a variety of possible outcomes that can result from learning across a broad range of contexts that, when combined, support that individual to potentially be successful in life, not just within the context of employment. The challenges of consistency and overall effectiveness may then arise if the views of this leader are translated through to their team. This may, in turn, potentially reinforce these sentiments with other academics, who could already hold a similar view. Understanding, interpretations and the associated discourse are all clearly key considerations as causes of such a disconnect.

There were, other leaders who recognised the relevance and importance of addressing employability in HE today, yet still saw it as disconnected from core business, and primarily for the purpose of supporting the employment agenda.

I think there's the tension from the teaching staff, that tension between teaching their subject that is their passion and relating it to employability or seeing employability as integrated to it when they might see that as being somebody else's job. They have the thing of 'you're asking us to do this as well?' 'Well, yeah. Don't you want your students to be successful?' 'But shouldn't you love the subject for the sake of loving the subject?' 'Well no, actually students need to get a job at the end of their three years and start paying back their twenty-seven-thousand-pound loan. So how can we help them get to that position?' So, there's that constant tension.

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

It may be suggested that these tensions are common across the sector, not only within sport, but within other disciplines too. The disconnect may be associated with the very argument around the purpose of HE, which has previously been discussed in the literature review and is referred to again in the quotation below:

I think for some academics it's actually the concept of it. I think there's two sides to it. I think some academics do, I think, feel that they're here to do the academic bit and therefore they're not interested in that wider discussion about where it's going to lead.

Leader, University A, case study 2016

The views expressed here by leaders begin to give some insight into how employability is viewed and understood at a senior level. Whilst several leaders articulated a broader and more nuanced view of employability, there were others who articulated a much narrower, more focused and sometimes disconnected view of the concept. Consistency is therefore an issue, and how this might best be achieved while still empowering subject specialists to feel a sense of ownership in shaping and leading this agenda is discussed in the following section.



### *A common understanding?*

Where there is not a shared understanding and interpretation of the terms *employment* and *employability*, there is the potential for this to directly impact on strategic institutional-level objectives for employability, and therefore practice across institutions. This matters, because different learning activities are required to address the *employment* challenge as opposed to an *employability* challenge. The language employed by leaders is critical in this regard, as it will shape and influence how an approach is designed to meet a desired outcome. The question raised here again is, is the chosen outcome or area of focus the correct one? While this lack of clarity continues, inconsistencies will continue to occur.

An example of where a range of practices exists across a single institution is provided in the following quotation:

So, it's a common thing in terms of some institutions. People are being rather allowed to do their own little thing in whatever domain they choose to operate and fairly often its lone operators. And to not operate within a wider community or organisation which itself may gain some added value through the fact that it operates as a bigger organisation. So that rather siloed and amateur and local approach...

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

In the absence of a coherent or identifiable consistent approach that is co-ordinated and led from the centre, when academic staff and leaders need to be seen to be responding to a strategic priority even while busy with competing priorities, issues are likely to arise. Whole team approaches were rarely spoken about by participants in this study. Collectively this demonstrates that a clearly defined and supported strategic level approach to employability is not always evident in practice.

Early in this chapter, the significance of the metrics was highlighted and the pressure that the league tables can create at several levels and on institutional strategy. Achieving target metrics, as measures of the initial employment rates of graduates, has become the shared objective for institutions and those individuals working with

them. This focus on employment is again highlighted by the following survey response from an academic, who suggests that:

Employability is about preparing students for work after academia by ensuring that they have acquired the necessary skills required in their vocations, and that these skills are transferable.

Academic, University A, national survey 2015

Here we can see the direct association between employment and gaining a set of *skills* that are necessary to support it. A colleague from the same institution went on to state: “Employability is the readiness of an individual to gain employment”, Academic, University A, national survey 2015. Although from a different institution, the following academic stated: “Higher education’s role is to deliver 'fit for purpose' graduates into industry”. Academic, national survey 2015.

These views of academics taken from the national survey have been included in this strategy section, as these were common themes that have previously been raised as a key finding in the survey section, where an overt focus on skills and employment was highlighted. In addition, their inclusion here is valued, as consideration of the results between the stages of this research will support the identification of potential patterns or trends - in this case where developing a common understanding is a potential shared theme across all participant groups. The findings also illustrate the relationship that exists between the understanding at practice level and the position that can be articulated by some leaders. This ties directly into the research aims concerned with how understanding between strategy and practice are potentially connected.

Taking these views of participating academics into consideration, the potential power and influence of leaders on this agenda is clear, particularly when considering the similarities in the language employed by the following senior leader from the same institution as two of the three academics included above, who stated:

So, we’re looking at moving all of our students into fulfilling careers that hopefully use the skills and experience that they’ve developed whilst they’re

here.... Our aspiration is that they will move into graduate level employment. So, employability is the skills that they need to develop to move into graduate level employment.

Senior leader, University A, case study 2016

These views mirror those stated at the start of the chapter, suggesting the influence of the external and perceived measure of success, in this case the DLHE, measures that directly relate to graduate level employment.

Collectively these quotations articulate two shared themes amongst the samples in both the national survey and the case studies. The first is concerned with gaining a job and securing employment, and the second, that this may be achieved by somehow acquiring a somewhat vague and ambiguous collection of *skills*.

Further evidence of these views being commonly held amongst the sample of leaders, who, in practice, are operating at a variety of levels within each institution, includes the following comments:

I think the university is aware for example around employability that our measures in relation to the sector are maybe not as high. So, we have really good employability rates. It's gone up. It's something like ninety four percent employability rate. Our graduate employability rate which has also gone up is only something like sixty-two. So, in comparison with the sector, our graduate employability rate is relatively low...

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

This same member of staff then went on to say:

...we don't say 'your KPI or target for employability in this school is this.' We don't focus people's minds on that target. And I think there is a view that 'oh well that's a sector target. That's just the way it is.' Rather than saying to teams 'no, actually you could have an influence on this.'

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

First, this notion of utilising the data to motivate and drive behaviour in staff has been highlighted previously by another leader at the same institution. It is also worthwhile noting the repeated use of the term *employability rate* by this leader. As previously discussed, this highlights a misunderstanding in what the metrics represent, yet when we reflect on the content and focus of the institutional documents examined previously, this view is unsurprising.

All participants in the interviews were asked what employability, as a term, meant to them and what is subsequently involved in addressing it in practice. What was observed in several of the leader responses was almost a default position, where they spoke about employability in a very narrow and restrictive way at times, as illustrated by this quotation:

You can give them the skills to do a presentation; you can give them the skills to write a report, you can give them the skills and the practice to be able to write well, to be able to speak well, to be able to put forward an argument. But the minute anybody gets into a new job, you're back to learning from stage one because you don't know. But you want those basic skills to be there so that the employer can then take that individual and move them forward.

Senior leader, University A, case study 2016

What is interesting in this quotation is how the concept of employability is almost seen as being transactional, 'we give them skills', when we know that to acquire and develop skills is very much a long term, dynamic and iterative process that requires effort on the part of the participant, not just the tutor providing a ready-made set of skills that somehow are simply given to the student.

The focus on both skills and employment is supported by this senior leader:

It's about making sure that what the students experience on their programmes have got a real relevance to what they're going to do when they leave. So, employability, I think, is about making students aware of what the prospects are when they leave, the opportunities, and the expectations that will be made on

them by future employers. So, it's about them developing a skillset, a knowledge base that will enhance their career prospects in the long term.

Senior Leader, University B, case study 2016

This highlights the interwoven relationship of employment and skills once again, with both aspects perceived to be pivotal in relation to the concept of employability. This is significantly different from how employability has been conceptually defined in the literature, and this point needs to be further explored.

#### *Alignment with the conceptual models?*

Academia, by its very nature, is associated with research and research-informed thinking, planning and teaching. Yet the findings of this thesis suggest that there is currently very little evidence that the existing research on employability, particularly the conceptual models that have been developed, e.g. Career Edge (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017a) or USEM (Knight and Yorke, 2004), are informing work conducted either at strategic or practice level, with leaders, academics or their students.

During the interviews with leaders, they were asked where their views on employability had emanated from. The following quotation is an example of the responses received:

I guess it's going to be a combination of all sorts of things. Obviously as you know I came from a non-HE background. So, I had a view about how you develop young people, fourteen to nineteen-year olds particularly but I'd also worked with adults in lifelong learning as well. So, it's that perspective of how you engage people with developing their skills and then being able to articulate their skills and hopefully be able to gain employment from that. And then obviously coming here there has been then an increasing focus on that meaning that you can then progress onto graduate level employment because this is a higher education institution.

Senior leader, University A, case study 2016

Only three staff across both the academic and leader samples in both case studies, referred to specific research and literature that had influenced their understanding of employability. Instead, *common sense*, *experience* and *other colleagues* were the most frequently cited sources of influence.

Conversely, there were some individuals who appeared to acknowledge the complex nature of employability without having necessarily read widely on the subject, and these have been cited throughout this chapter. For example:

So, employ and ability seem to go quite well together. In its most practical sense, you could argue that it's simply therefore about preparing individuals to have all the right capabilities to enter the world of work and make an effective contribution to their workplace, their family, their society, their culture and an increasingly global community.

Leader, University A, case study 2016

This could be considered a relatively sophisticated view of employability, from an individual who explicitly stated that their views were not informed by the literature. While this was positively articulated, how it would then be translated into practice with their team was not clear. With no theoretical underpinning to support their views, would fellow academics agree and engage with this kind of interpretation of employability?

The views of leaders captured collectively through the case studies, and when viewed alongside the results of the national survey, create a fascinating picture of how employability is understood and interpreted in HE at a strategic and practice level. Whilst some consensus exists, recognising that it is an institutional priority, most often understanding relates directly to the notion of employment as measured by DLHE, supported by a skills development focus. The issue here is that these views simply do not have a robust underpinning, in terms of being informed by an evidence base or conceptual grounding from the literature (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a,).

Overall, this creates a higher education environment hosting multiple voices, with some similarities but also distinct differences. The impact of this will be further

explored in the following chapter, where a more in-depth examination of the views of academics who are working directly with students, together with students themselves, will be examined.

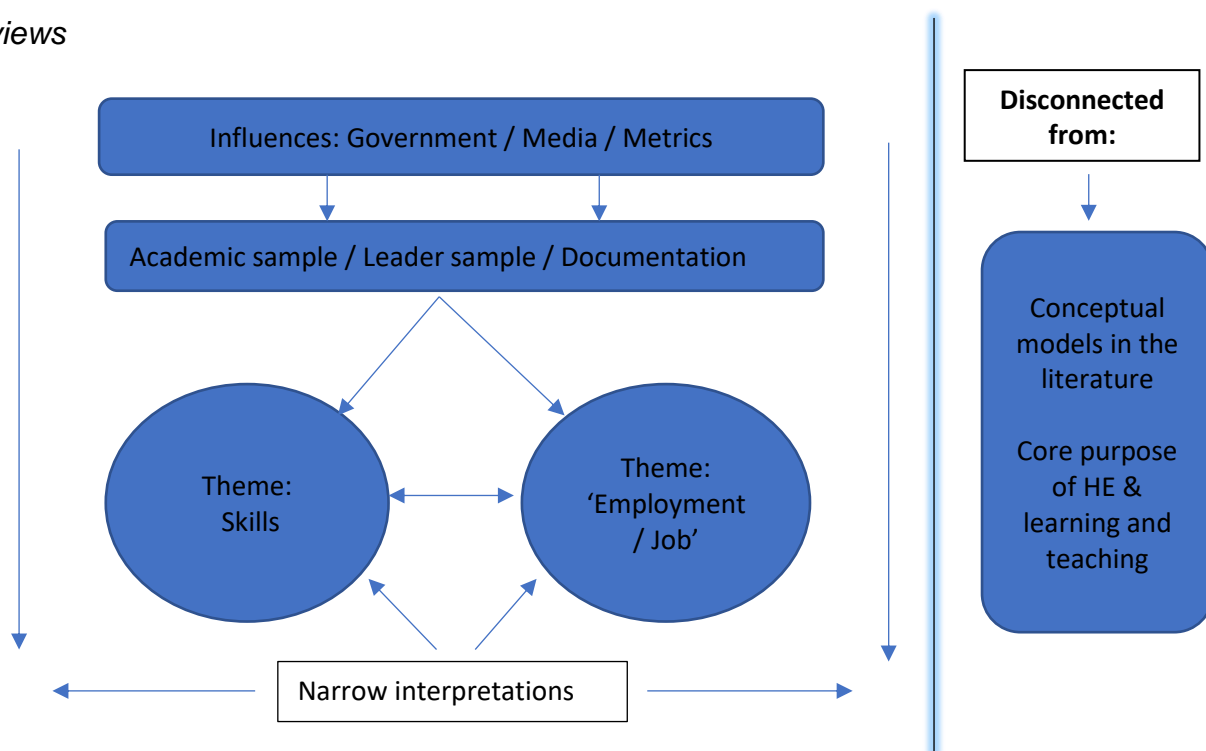
## **Summary**

This chapter has directly related to the first of the research aims, to examine current understanding and the resulting discourse amongst the leader and academic samples, and in particular referring to the supporting employability literature. The second research aim was to then develop a framework or model to better support more effective future approaches. In support of both of these aims, throughout this chapter areas in need of further attention at a strategic and practice level have been highlighted. Synergies between the academic sample captured through the national survey and the leaders engaged as participants in the cases studies from both institutions are also introduced, in direct response to the specific research question which sought to establish any relationship between these levels. What was established was a variable discourse evident across the combined samples, with a commonly narrow focus on employment and skills evident throughout. This resulted in a correspondingly narrow focus in relation to the learning activities designed to respond to each of these areas.

While there was also evidence of specific individuals holding a view of employability that was more nuanced, there was an almost universal lack of engagement with the conceptual models of employability. This lack of engagement with the supporting body of literature around employability only served to reinforce the narrow conceptualisation of this area of work, in the absence of a more appropriate, research-informed and diverse point of reference. These areas are highlighted in the summary of the key findings, along with how employability is currently positioned based on current common understanding, and how work in employability is therefore often perceived as being disconnected from other core activities within the institution.

As an overview of the findings in this chapter, the following figure includes the key themes identified via the national survey stage, the leader interviews and the documentation reviewed as part of the two institutional case studies conducted.

Figure 8: Interpretations of employability: key themes and influences identified through the national survey with academics, institutional document review and leader interviews



The top left box in Figure 8 represents the key influences on those views expressed and identified, that understanding around the concept of employability was heavily influenced by government policy and discourse, as well as the prominence of the metrics and league tables in the media.

In the main, employability was largely articulated by these participant groups in relation to two key themes including in the circles in Figure 8. First there was an inseparable connection made with *employment* and *securing a job*, and this was directly related to a set of *skills* necessary to support that goal. Most responses and views expressed fell within these two themes. This is described here as being a particularly narrow view of employability, as captured in the box on the left side, at the bottom of Figure 8.

On the right-hand side of Figure 8 and, critically, separate from the other aspects described, these interpretations of employability by these participants are positioned in this thesis as being disconnected in two ways. First, these views were disconnected



from the conceptual models published in the research. Second, employability was perceived and described as being something separate and additional to the core business of higher education, namely learning and teaching. This detachment was articulated by participants in terms of questioning the place of employability in higher education and not always taking personal responsibility for its delivery.

The following chapter considers the findings from the academic and student samples captured through the case studies in both institutions.

## Chapter 6

# Academic and student understanding of employability and the resulting discourse

### Introduction

This chapter will first outline how academics in the case studies, understand and interpret employability, before reporting how students within the sample also understand and experience employability. Consideration is also given throughout the chapter to the two research questions below:

1. How is employability understood at an academic and practice level?
2. Is there a connection between the strategic and practice levels of the understanding of employability, and how does this manifest itself within sports degree programmes?

This chapter explores how academics who work directly on undergraduate sports programmes, and their students, understand employability; and how these views at a practice level then align with those views expressed both in the national survey and at a strategic level discussed in the previous chapter.

The key findings here include the notion of the existence of a narrow understanding around employability, which mirrors the findings in the previous chapter; and how this commonly manifests as a focus on both skills development and employment. Once more, this is with no reference made to the more nuanced conceptual models of employability in the available literature. In this way, similarities can again be drawn between the interchangeable use of the terms *employability* and *employment* in the resulting discourse, which has already been flagged as an issue in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, however, it is also recognised that a broader understanding of employability is evident amongst certain participants, but this time within the academic and student samples. This demonstrates a lack of consistency in current

understanding, which was also highlighted within the leader sample and in the findings from the national survey.

Consideration is then given to the issue of ownership, and who is responsible for employability, while also exploring the challenges around translating strategy into practice. This directly relates to one of the research questions stated at the start of the chapter, reflecting on how interpretations of employability connect between the levels within an institution.

Developing this view further, the student perspective is explored in more depth, establishing a number of common themes that align with the findings in the previous chapter, where a focus on employment, gaining experience and a lack of clarity around an overall understanding of employability exists. This leads into the final section which reinforces one further key finding from the leader sample and national survey, where employability can often be positioned as disconnected and a discrete area of work.

## **Understanding employability**

### *Skills and employment*

A focused and narrow understanding and interpretation of employability amongst a number of stakeholders has been highlighted throughout this thesis. Evidence of this was provided from within this academic sample, as demonstrated nicely when an academic from Institution B was asked what they believed students' understanding of the term employability was:

Good question. I don't know whether that many students can necessarily give you an idea of what employability is...It's this buzzword. For example, us on the open days will bang out employability because it's a buzzword that people like to hear. But do they really understand what it is?... I think they understand this in terms of trying to upskill, make yourself more likely to get a job.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This quotation illustrates how there is a level of acceptance that the word is not well understood, and that what understanding academics do have is often distilled down to a more restrictive notion of skills, and directly linked to gaining a job.

The importance of the discourse around employability is further highlighted by the following academic, when questioned about students' perceptions of employability:

I think they think it's about getting a 2:1. So the main thing that they focus on, this comes from the focus group project that we did with them, was about what grade they get for their assignment. Then if they've got an additional work experience, so if they've done a placement or something... So, when we then pushed them on some of the criteria, the more we discussed it, actually the better they got. I think that comes down to the awareness stuff, is that they hadn't really thought about it at a deeper level.

Academic, University B, case study, 2016

This quotation flags the importance of needing to achieve greater clarity with students from the outset, so that they may each achieve that deeper level of understanding, with all students actively reflecting on what employability means to them in their lives and for their futures. The risk here is that the concept of employability remains one viewed at a surface level, and that the nuances and intricacies surrounding it will continue to remain implicit and hidden.

The association between *skills* and *employment* is further highlighted in the sample of academics when asked directly, what employability meant to them. As one academic stated:

I think employability for me is its readiness to hit the ground running when they [students] finish university in their job... and they are ready to go in any particular job. So, it's more on the job skills and training which is why I'm cynical because I don't see that as the university's job.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

Similar views emerged from interviews with other academics, as the following quotations demonstrate: “to have experience of work and build up other employability skills, that it makes them stand out from students from other universities”. Academic, University A, case study 2016. Followed by:

To me, personally, I think it's about initially being able to have those qualities and be able to get employment. To be able to stay in employment, so to have transferrable qualities that enable you to move around and get different jobs and have the kind of things that employers want. So, kind of an interaction I guess, in terms of things that you have, things that you gain, attributes that are wanted, needed and regarded in the marketplace of employment, and to stay there as well.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

These quotations demonstrate a range of views that align with the findings of the national survey, from the simplistic to those demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of employability as a concept. The first academic cited admitted to being cynical about the employability agenda and its purpose. It is quite possible that views such as this may impact on how employability is addressed in practice with students, at least by this member of staff. In the second quotation *skills* has become an umbrella term for what they perceive to be the differentiators amongst graduates. In the third quotation, the discourse evolves into one of qualities and demonstrating a longer-term view more closely related to career, recognising that graduates will move from job to job. However, these qualities are not defined further, leaving them ambiguous and with the potential to be misunderstood by the students.

The responses from academics in both the case studies and the national survey collectively act as evidence of a limited and narrow view of employability. Further evidence of the challenge this creates can be found within the literature research. As Holmes (2001: 112) articulates:

Despite the considerable body of critical literature (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000), the skills agenda continues to be promoted in policy, at national and institutional level.

Use of the word *skills* may be seen as problematic in relation to a broader employability underpinning, yet it does, at least, indicate the national level of interest in seeking to develop the performance of individuals in the workplace, and does highlight the importance of factors beyond subject knowledge alone. It can also be suggested to have become habitual amongst many. Clearly other qualities and dispositions should also be made explicit with students so that they can have a better understanding of what is important from the perspective of becoming lifelong and lifewide learners (Higdon, 2016 and Jackson, 2008,). An interesting justification for the use of the word *skill* by one academic has been included below:

My understanding with skills is that they can be learned. That's why I like the word skills, it's not assuming that it's a personality trait that can't be changed or can't develop it.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

Another academic added the following, when asked what employers were looking for in graduates:

And also, that's probably more to do with your personality. And we can't alter that easily. So, if you come and you're bright and chirpy and happy to adapt and be flexible and be proactive and can be trusted to work on your own and know when to ask questions rather than just sit there and get confused and not tell anybody. It's that kind of thing they're looking for.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

While the academics justify their understanding and how they articulate employability with logical reasoning, there is still an ambiguity. This raises questions around how exactly these areas would then be explained with their students? Even if certain qualities may be perceived as out of reach from a pedagogical perspective, this does not mean that they shouldn't be acknowledged as being important. The findings would suggest both a lack of clarity and detail in the nuances and specifics around the concept of employability once again.

The importance of students developing across a broader range of areas, beyond skills, was highlighted by the following academic when asked to elaborate on a point they raised, about the importance of focusing on *how the students are as people*? They added the following:

Obviously, they can tell what degree you've done, what you've done on paper and stuff like that, but they also need to see you in their field of work. So how you're going to be and what kind of person you are. I always think if you want to be a PE teacher, you need to be someone who's outgoing, bubbly, knows how to have a laugh with the kids to a certain extent and build that rapport. Whereas you can look at some PE teachers that just don't. They just teach you sport and that's it. They need to know what else you can give as a person, who you are...

Academic, University B, case study 2016

The quotation suggests a much richer picture of the learning vital to supporting the development of a range of qualities and dispositions. It is important to make this clear with students too, so that they are aware and ultimately understand what is required. The wider research would suggest it is valuable to paint the whole picture for students, rather than presenting a partial view of the factors that are likely to influence their long-term success (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Higdon, 2016).

This issue of awareness and engagement is supported by Artess et al. (2017: 18), citing Roepen (2015) and Morrison (2014), who found that many students lack confidence about mobilising transferrable and non-technical skills in the workplace. If the value of these areas is not explicitly articulated with students from the outset, then a lack of student engagement and impact is likely to be the end result.

Again, the focus on skills is demonstrated in the following response:

Well last year we were involved with an employability study that we did as part of an institutional project. We had the same set of questions for staff, for employers and for students. It was basically ranking the importance of certain different skills and to see which group rated the information highest. Employers

and staff were pretty similar with a lot of the – like you say, the emphasis on the soft skills, going back to where we were at the start. The soft skills, working as a team, being flexible, being proactive. All of those were really ranked high. Whereas with the students, a lot of theirs was all on the subject specific knowledge, being able to use software, IT. All the hard skills. Whereas all the working as a team, being flexible, being on time were ranked three, four. Really low...

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This quotation raises two interesting points. First, whilst the rigidity of a skills-based lexicon is again evident, there is at least some differentiation between different types of skills and there is recognition that some of the ‘softer’, more human qualities beyond knowledge or technical skills are important. Second, this academic acknowledges that the disconnect that can occur between what practitioners and employers believe is important to employability, and to what the students themselves believe (Higdon, 2016).

A further example of where understanding of employability is articulated as *skills* in daily discourse was captured below:

I think there’s a good overlap between the sports science and the sports coaching staff. Obviously, there’s where the general knowledge or the sports specific knowledge is very different in terms of the two sides, even the different modules, the different disciplines within it but generally I think within the area it’s the general skills that we’re seeing that we want all of our graduates to have are very similar.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

But what are these *general skills*? To what extent is there consensus between academics and professional services staff on what they are, and are the students aware of what they encompass? These questions and this common discourse is considered in more depth in Chapter 7.



The importance of defining employability is raised again here: if it's not defined, what is being worked towards and how can it ultimately be understood, addressed and measured? Clearly, some individuals will need support in understanding why it is important to define this term at all, while taking the published conceptual models into account and simultaneously working with students, fellow academics, employers and other key stakeholders so that a shared and common understanding and discourse might be established from the outset.

### *Broader views of employability*

Amongst the misunderstandings and misconceptions of employability already cited, there were also academics and students who hold a longer-term, more nuanced view of the concept that is more in line with the employability research, and similar to that of several leaders and academics highlighted in the previous chapter. However, one academic interviewed highlighted the challenges and realities around seeking to define this complex concept with students:

The challenge I get, I think, with it is sometimes it's so broad that you almost don't engage with it because it's too big. All the stuff we're talking about, so employability is about having the opportunity to see if your face fits. Also, we're talking about self-awareness...motivation...metacognitive abilities...reflection...subject specific discipline knowledge, technical skills...communication.... So as soon as you harness all that stuff and you think who's responsible for developing all those things, I think that becomes a pretty massive task to kind of conceptualise it ... I won't define employability, even really talk about it that much. I'm focusing on sports psychology...on the students' need to be safe and effective to practice from a professional practice perspective.

### Academic, University A, case study 2016

This particular academic recognises the complexities of employability as a concept, which is an important first step. They also raise a critical consideration, that the associated learning to support employability is too much for a single academic or module to engage with in isolation. However, failure to at least attempt to define it in

context for students, will not help when it comes to challenging commonly held existing views, especially where individual interpretation may remain narrowly fixed, in the absence of a richer and research informed definition and view.

Further recognising the complexity of the concept of employability and, on this occasion, its synergies with learning and teaching, was recognised by another academic:

I have read the literature and I have designed some workshops on employability and delivered some workshops on employability. Ultimately, I think employability is good teaching and learning, which is where it comes into me. If we're doing our good teaching and learning jobs properly, we will produce employable graduates. That's my take on things.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This was certainly not the norm, however, in relation to how academics have developed their views, with other sources commonly being cited:

I'd definitely say it's more experience. It's not really about what we've learnt in terms of a model or anything like that. I've come from a background working outside of academia, so I think I had a good idea about what industry demands.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

The assertions from the first academic are positive and highlight the benefits of engaging with the literature, recognising the opportunities for more integrated future approaches to learning, teaching and employability. Evidently a range of views exist, with some academics considering this agenda part of their role, particularly where there is an association with learning and teaching-related activities. Yet other academics do not discuss employability in relation to learning and teaching at all, more closely identifying it with a discrete set of activities, such as placements or careers-related sessions. This separation could be, in part, due to a lack of engagement with the established conceptual models of employability and therefore having the narrow understanding and interpretation that is associated with employability when it is referred to in daily discourse as being purely about the acquisition of skills and

securing a job. This, in turn, could be suggested to have had an impact on how responsibility for this agenda is also perceived. A focus on *job and skills* may not align well with many academics' views of the overall purpose of learning and teaching, so potentially this disconnect may occur.

Students we get at HE just disengage with it a little bit. I think potentially employability could be a little bit like that. I think it's really important that we get students to be thinking long term about where they would like to be in two, three, five, ten years' time. I think we as academics and staff, probably need to do a little bit more to try and make it a little bit more digestible for them, that's my personal view.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This academic highlights the challenge of engaging students with the concept and the need to get them thinking more long-term, which is likely to prove challenging to those students who are not clear on their first step on the career ladder, let alone transitions throughout their longer working life. The complexity of employability is both acknowledged and misunderstood by another academic as highlighted in the quotation below:

...I think gradueness and employability are two different things, both of which need to be considered in parallel. So, employability yes is more the vocational, the on the job skills and things like that. Gradueness is much more about the notion of civic responsibilities and social responsibilities, abilities to think critically and abilities to go into any job and be able to adapt and do what's needed because you're independent and you're critical and that sort of thing.... Employability is fine but employability is everybody's duty. In fact, if anything, it's the individual's duty to make themselves employable whereas gradueness is actually the responsibility of the university as opposed to employability, I think.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

This is interesting as it highlights again a misunderstanding around the concept of employability, yet their own interpretation of *graduateness* actually aligns very well with the conceptual models of employability presented in the literature review. Their view of employability aligns more with the government, media and industry driven rhetoric: rather narrow and somehow distinct from the broader, more holistic notion of an individuals all round qualities and dispositions (Higdon, 2016).

This once more raises the issue of responsibility, although the distinction between employability and graduateness and the suggestion that the students are responsible for the first and the university is responsible for the latter is slightly concerning. With clear commonalities across both areas, ultimately both parties are responsible. Separating this agenda unnecessarily may only confuse matters for all concerned.

### *Engagement and responsibility*

On occasion, as has already been observed, the questions asked of academics in the survey and through the focus groups and interviews evoked emotional responses. We may assume that this could then potentially impact on the subsequent behaviours of these individuals in practice, and how they, in turn, articulate employability with their students. Where these views may be considered to be somewhat negative, with a reluctance to take responsibility for this agenda, this is concerning.

The following response from one of the surveyed academics is an example of these tensions and the disconnect that can occur:

It is problematic since an academic institution is traditionally concerned to develop critical thinking and to provide the theory and practice of knowledge. Employability is about what is currently seen as opportunities for students to gain jobs. In a time of scarce resources there is a pull back from intellectual thinking and towards practical skills. The concept of employability is yet another political attempt to control what is considered to be appropriate and legitimate knowledge. The country would be much better placed in bringing back apprenticeships and day releases.

Academic, University A, national survey 2015

Here, this academic interprets employability as relating to gaining a job, very much seeing this concept as being about employment and gaining practical skills and being somehow at odds with the true purpose of HE. In reality, the concept of employability, as defined in the literature, is also about gaining knowledge, developing critical thinking and all those other qualities academics wish to see in good students. This unnecessary tension (Knight and Yorke, 2004) results due to preconceptions and misunderstandings around the meaning of a word, caused by a number of factors already highlighted in previous chapters.

Coincidentally, this same academic was interviewed a year later in the case study, where they added this to the view expressed previously:

I think employability for me is its readiness to hit the ground running when they [students] finish university in their job. So, it's more on the job skills and training which is why I'm cynical because I don't see that as the university's job...

Academic, University A, case study 2016

These views continue to be relatively narrow and fixed on employability being concerned with gaining a particular job, and considered to be something separate, for the workplace and nothing more. The theme that is emerging appears to be detachment from a sense of responsibility with some academics, and that preparing students for their careers should not be part of the overall purpose of higher education, and is therefore not part of their remit. Once again, the place and purpose of employability is disconnected at the practice level.

It is worth reflecting again why academics, such as the one cited above, are reluctant to engage in this agenda and don't view employability as their responsibility:

I think partly it's probably because people are thinking back to when they were at university. So, I think there's this belief that we're still in the same culture that we were twenty years ago, where you only had about five per cent of people going to university, and lectures were just someone standing there giving you information. What you did after that was up to you. The climate has changed a lot now in terms of the way that we teach and how we teach. I think there's

some people that feel that as a university student you should be responsible for your own development and your own skill development. We're here to provide you with academic information and skills around research and subject content. I think that's what some people see the academic role is.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

The points raised here link back to the discussions around the purpose of HE first examined in the literature review, and perhaps demonstrates a lack of appreciation for how HE has changed in recent years, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

### *Strategy to practice*

Directly associated with the second research question at the start of this chapter, considering the link between strategy and practice, evidence within the literature of research informed, co-ordinated and consistent approaches to employability is limited.

From a lack of specific direction at a strategic level, through to how this manifests at the programme level with academics, further evidence of a lack of co-ordination is highlighted below:

So, we don't really talk a lot about it as a team but we are quite proactive in trying to provide our students, particularly our level six students to be fair, but level five and level four as well, with opportunities to really try and upskill on a range of skills.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

Although it is duly acknowledged that this academic and their colleagues are making efforts to be proactive in addressing the employability agenda, the fact that this work is not co-ordinated across the team is concerning, and once again the dominant theme of *skills* is present.

A tangible example of how introducing change at the institutional level comes with clear challenges is articulated in the following quotation:

I've got to be honest; it doesn't really impact on me at a programme level. I just kind of do my own thing. There's no clear guidance on what it should look like and every time you go to a validation panel, sometimes the panel will be all over it, sometimes they just go right past it and won't even care. Sometimes they'll look at the way you've done it and say, 'I want you to do it differently'. And you say 'hang on a minute. I did one the other week and they asked me to do it this way. Now you're asking me to do it a different way.' So that's all over the place. And I think a lot of the time people just kind of tick things without too much thought on where it could go...

Academic, University A, case study 2016

While this is the opinion of one academic, this reluctance to engage more seriously with the employability agenda was observed amongst a number of academics within the sample. Both process and infrastructure are critical to developing more effective, strategic approaches to employability. In the case above, a new process had been introduced, but the challenges of then ensuring staff engage with it effectively is clearly evident.

Further evidence of this issue within the same team is presented below:

We had a meeting the other day about our five-year strategy going forward and it was the same messages as ever. Employability was very much a part of that. We must embed employability in our courses to which we all said 'we're already doing it. Of course, we're already doing it. We've been doing it for years.' I've been in this job fifteen years and employability has always been a part of that job.

DC: So, they don't break it down? They're not more prescriptive than that?

I don't think they know how to. I think they struggle with it probably even more than I struggle with it. I don't really know what employability is and I'm the person that's working with it day to day. So, they're not really working with it day to day so of course they don't know what it is. They have no idea. And do they actually care? I think is a key question... I don't know if they do.

#### Academic, University A, case study 2016

This reported lack of clarity of direction and purpose around employability is, again, concerning. This academic admits that they do not know what employability is; this has clear implications for the students that they teach and certainly warrants further attention. There were some commonalities expressed by an academic at the second case study institution too:

I think it's high on the university's agenda. They are aware that we need to basically help people to get jobs at the end of the university experience... I think the problem is there's some fantastic pioneering work going on right at the top where the policy changes and making things happen. Then obviously as it comes down into faculty department level a lot of people that make the pedagogic decisions, the overall decisions for the department are people that have been here a long, long time. They're probably a bit resistant to change, it probably doesn't permeate through to a lot of the staff at grade six and seven, who are all generally new. There's a massive nucleus of new staff in the department who are keen and eager to drive this forward. There is some good work going on, but I don't think a lot of the time it all gets down to us.

#### Academic, University B, case study 2016

Collectively, this acts as further evidence of the challenge that exists in translating strategy into practice, connecting through an institutions infrastructure and engaging academics in the process. While there are some successes evident, resistance to this agenda in places is also noted, with suggestions that this is deep-rooted, meaning that longer-term cultural change is required in order to challenge these behaviours and misconceptions.

University B has sought to establish an institutional approach to employability that is embedded in their wider approach to learning and teaching, more specifically the curriculum design process, and ensuring that the connection between strategy and practice at programme level was considered. This was highlighted by the following member of staff at this institution:



The whole ethos.... was that the programme is a mechanism for developing employability within the student body. I think again, it makes sense because a programme is the thing that a student is most connected to. That's part of their identity, I'm a sport science student and they have contact with sports science staff. So, it's how can we, rather than having the employability stuff sit outside of the programme with them doing volunteering, and that's all fine and they should still be doing that. But it's utilising the programme as well to try and address some of the employability skills. I think that would be the university approach to it, which is evident through the process that we went through, with employability being one of four key pillars that every programme needed to consider when they were restructuring and revalidating the content.

#### Academic University B, case study 2016

The strategic approach to employability adopted by University B is, at a conceptual level, aligned with a national framework for employability (Cole and Tibby, 2013), which, in turn, has been informed by research. This innovative approach is in its relative early stages and its full impact will not become clear for some time. It is worth noting that the principles of local ownership and context as essential considerations as part of this institutional approach are supported by Turner (2014: 598), who highlights the importance of context, and cites students developing self-belief as a critical feature of employability:

On a practical level, this suggests that HEPs should provide students with early opportunities to experience control, success, and improvement in order to develop self-belief and agentic behaviour, and that these activities should be embedded in the specific context of the subject of study.

This supports the focus and ownership over any employability activity needing to be shaped at a programme level. In addition, at least from a consistency perspective, it's key that this approach is driven centrally. Further evidence of the benefits of a connection between central strategy and programme level practice at this particular institution was provided by the following academic, who stated:

The [institutional initiative] that I mentioned earlier, that has forced us to sit down as programme teams because you've got to as part of the paperwork there was mapping where employability is coming into the programmes. So, I think that has started to get people thinking in a more joined up and coordinated fashion about, where are we addressing employability across the programmes.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This is in contrast to the situation at this institution previously, where the same academic stated:

Originally, it's been quite ad hoc, I think, and it's come from personal staff members who have either a specific interest in developing employability skills or have been given a specific role for it. So, placement coordinators and things like that.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This particular academic had a clear leadership role related to employability, but it does at least portray from their perspective, the reported positive impact that this recent strategic initiative has had at a programme level and with individual academics. As part of the new curriculum design process at University B, academics have had to complete a programme template, which includes a focus in the following areas:

(University B) Employability, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship, with specific reference to how the programme will:

- Embed employability in learning and teaching strategies, through engagement with the employability framework
- Enable all students to have the opportunity for career development learning
- Enable all students to have the opportunity for a work-related learning experience

- Provide opportunities for students to have access to enterprise and entrepreneurial learning

University B, programme design template, 2017

These principles set a clear direction for all staff at a strategic level, yet provide flexibility for how each one might best be addressed in practice, in the context of each programme.

With messaging emerging at strategy level explicitly highlighting these areas, it is no surprise that this is then reflected in the programme documentation and the rhetoric of those academics involved. Reflecting on this point, an Academic at University B highlights how they have considered this very issue:

We realised that we were doing that classic thing of linking employability just into two modules. So, we had some activities that we felt were associated with employability in the level four skills module, so Skills for Sport and Exercise Scientists. We found that we had nothing really obviously specific that could be identified as an employability module at level five, so there was a gap. Then we had our placement module at level six. So, I suppose looking at it from a very simplistic perspective... we have an employability module at level four and one at level six, from a very surface level there is that. Which called into question for us, what happens at level five, why is there no tracking through of modules.... I think my big thing which links into what I'm doing at the moment is, it's not just about what we teach, it's how we teach.

Academic University B, case study 2016

While there is recognition here that consideration needs to be given to *how we teach*, not just *what we teach*, which is positive, it is not clear here how deeply the appreciation for the complexity of employability extends. The language used ("we had nothing really obviously specific that could be identified as an employability module at level five, so there was a gap") suggests that a single focused module at each level of study is adequate in terms of addressing employability, when in reality this is not the case.

A practical example of attempting to connect the curriculum and features of employability, thus embedding this work from the outset, is also presented in this example from University A:

Across all of our programmes, a lot of the assessments are geared to what the employers have asked us to do. So, we're not just writing an essay for an essay's sake... I know in sport and development they've got to write a bid for a project.... So, we've tried to gear as many of the assessments to real life employability scenarios as possible so that they can actually do something which is related to what they'll do when they get a job.

We kind of sat and we started discussing what does our graduate look like? And we just thought what does a manager look like? Well they need to know about finance. Okay, they might not be an accountant because they're going to employ an accountant but if they get a report, they're going to need to be able to read it. So, they need finance. They need a bit of law. Okay, they're never going to practice law because they'll employ people, but they'll need to understand a report. So, we just thought they're going to need all these skills...

Academic, University A, case study 2016

Clearly, attempts are being made to provide authentic activities and assessments that replicate the requirements of employers, in order to prepare students for their future. However, this is not sufficient to address employability more widely. Directly relating to this point, a student at the same institution had the following to say about how their course and the curriculum addressed their employability:

Ours didn't. I wish ours did because I don't feel like I've learnt enough... say for example I didn't do this degree; I'd still think I'd be in the same position... we've got five weeks left. I don't know how to manage a business. And this is sport management... this is really briefly; we just did balance sheets and profit and loss accounts. But that's it. Apart from that not much else that I can see as relevant... so sometimes I'm just like 'was it worth it?'

Student, University A, case study 2016

In the case of these individuals, this illustrates a disconnect in communication and understanding between both parties. The academic has clearly taken on board the need to develop more authentic assessment, with employer input and with due consideration to developing greater breadth of content across the curriculum. However, there is a perceived issue with the depth of this content from the student perspective, where they now feel, with graduation looming, that they are simply not prepared.

### **Student understanding of employability**

How employability is understood and experienced from a student perspective is a critical consideration, providing some insight into the impact of the understanding and interpretation described by academics who were participants in this study. In the same way that academics were asked to define employability, students were also asked if employability had been defined to them during their programme. As one student stated:

Not thoroughly, no. They might have touched on it but it's just basically making you realise what your employability skills are. It's not so much telling you this and that and its definitively employability. It's just they'll tell you that you've got to set yourself apart from everyone else. You've got to have that extra edge to be able to make yourself desirable for that job.

Student, University B, case study 2016

This was a commonly held view across the student sample in both institutions, demonstrating some synergies with the findings of Higdon (2016), who conducted research with students in the creative disciplines. In Higdon's thesis, students commonly articulated a view of employability with a clear focus on a number of routine and traditional factors, such as gaining experience and developing their skills through external certifications and badges, but then being unable to articulate a more diverse picture of their employability needs beyond these areas without further prompting. This is also in line with the findings of Tymon (2013:852) who found that student views of employability were "narrow in comparison to the literature". This resonates strongly with the findings of the national survey, from both an institutional and sector-level

perspective. When academic responses were coded, they also demonstrated a narrow view in comparison to the literature.

However, as with each of the other participant groups, there were certain individual students who did articulate a longer-term focus, although this may have been influenced by a number of variables. The student here was already employed, and their primary concern was for how they would be able to pay back the financial investment made into their studies.

I've got that job, but for me it will be how many more options do I have and how much better can I do. For me, coming here it obviously cost a lot more money. So how am I going to cope with that? I took the loan so how fast do I pay that back?

Student, University B, case study 2016

This is a very real issue for students, with university fees having increased over the last five years. This reinforces, for many, the importance of graduates improving their immediate and longer term employment prospects for financial reasons, and this will only work to retain their often sharp focus on simply gaining employment (CBI and NUS 2011 and Tomlinson, 2007). This is not unexpected but is very much a surface-level aspiration, with no clear and detailed understanding of what underpins one's ability to successfully secure and subsequently thrive in employment (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007 and Tymon, 2013).

A more nuanced understanding of employability, as previously mentioned, was recognised by several individuals, who viewed it as encompassing a broader range of qualities, stretching the narrative beyond *job* and *skills*, an example of which appears in this student quotation:

...but nowadays when I'm looking at jobs, they're always talking about being enthusiastic and being a people person. So, personality wise you need to be this vibrant kind of person as well.

Student, University A, case study 2016

The view from this student recognises the value of attitude and personality, two areas not always highlighted by students. It raises the question, are these kinds of factors required by employers being discussed and addressed by programme teams with all their students? At the very least, are students being signposted to these areas and how they might best develop them in the future, both in the curriculum and in life more broadly? This more holistic conception of employability was also evident in the work of Higdon (2016), who goes on to argue strongly against the dominant skills-based, neo-liberal conceptualisation of employability promoted by government and industry. This more nuanced conceptualisation of employability is again further illustrated by the student quotation below:

.... I've just had a job interview. They didn't care about past experiences or qualifications. They just wanted to know how you are as a person. If you're a decent person and get along with people, then you got the job...

Student, University B, case study 2016

This again provides further evidence of the value of these more varied qualities, as differentiators, that truly hold value to employability, yet continue to remain ambiguous and non-specific in relation to how learning to support employability might best be addressed in practice. Likewise, the student quoted below demonstrates an understanding of a more complex and varied view of employability and the implication this has on the activities they need to engage with for their future development:

One of the things we see now at open days is the degrees are all very well but everybody and his dog's got a degree now. So, you've got to have a portfolio of additional expertise, experiences and attributes that you've built up while you're at university. And it's possibly your portfolio that's going to sell you and get you a job, not necessarily your degree...

Student, University B, case study 2016

This highlights an important point, with students feeling the need to be capable of demonstrating their distinctiveness - what makes them different and sets them apart from their peers. Having a degree is clearly recognised as not being a differentiating

factor, and something more is required. Yet this is left relatively ambiguous and undefined again. This area is complex and not simple to translate without further reflection and engagement with supporting literature. Exploring this further, Higdon (2016) highlighted how students recognised the importance of both *confidence* and *contacts* in supporting their future employability and in order to get ahead. From a student perspective there are clear implications with all of this, as one student stated:

So, within Sports Development Coaching, our first year – what do they do in terms of employability? Well it's a coaching module so they get coaching qualifications as part of their first year. They get hands on practical experience of coaching and things like that which I would suggest is an employability area. Probably not a lot else.

Student, University A, case study 2016

These points make it clear that some students are only recognising a limited range of activities as supporting their future employability, with the wider curriculum being one such omission. It has been highlighted in the findings that employability has not been effectively defined with all students in this sample, therefore this lack of clarity is unsurprising. Several students in earlier quotations are stating key areas of learning that are critical to support their future success, but are these enough, and are they the same as the areas that the academics are focused on trying to provide? Establishing more effective alignment here is a critical step in terms of developing a more effective approach to employability, one that is specific and focused. If academics are not speaking about these areas, which are then not addressed or even signposted in the curriculum, this creates potential gaps in student understanding and experience in terms of the necessary qualities and dispositions to best support their future aspirations. This is where engagement with the conceptual models of employability can add value.

Demonstrating the potential influence of the academic voice with students, the quotation below is worth reflecting on:

I'm incredibly cynical about these things but I build them in anyway. I don't think these things work at all. But CV writing I think is always a useful skill. Job



interview skills and things like that are always useful and obviously I think directly related to employability.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

If an individual is incredibly cynical about something, will they really be able to then portray it in a meaningful, engaging and effective way with their students? Again, this emotional response may be connected to this academic's association between employability and gaining that first job.

Evidence of this narrow view is again articulated by the following student below:

Well to me it's quite a big thing because I want to get a job in what I want to do. That's why I did the course. And I know that obviously millions of people do sports science, so you've got to do extra things to put you above that person, that other candidate that you've gone for a job with. So, for me, employability's a major part of why I'm at university and that's why I do loads of extra-curricular stuff to make sure that I look good. But you said what about your friends. I know a lot of people that are just at uni to have a laugh and they're not really too fussed about what they'll do after it.

Student, University B, case study 2016

Here, engaging with extra-curricular activities is cited as a focus for enhancing a curriculum vitae. Whilst highlighting the importance of gaining experience, which is clearly important, this a more complex issue and awareness and consideration is also required of the specific benefits and outcomes that may be gained. Interestingly, this student also raises the issue of how it is quite challenging to engage some students into investing in this area at all.

As a feature of the student engagement challenge, establishing awareness of the various areas of learning and the associated outcomes that potentially support their future development in a particular subject or area is key. The next task is then ensuring students are aware of where these potential learning opportunities exist, both in the curriculum and beyond. As an example of the relationship between the findings of the academic and student samples, one academic stated:

I'm keen to try to give students opportunities alongside the degree course which will help them to get a job. And I would very much say that's just based upon one, conversations with people and two, personal experiences and obviously seeing all those people that I've graduated with and stuff like that, that haven't done stuff alongside the degree course and then subsequently struggle to gain employment in the roles that they want.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

An emphasis is being placed here on the importance of gaining experience from a range of sources in order to secure employment, rather than stressing the importance of why, exactly, these experiences are so important. What are the potential learning outcomes and therefore the value of these learning experiences for the students? This aspect to the narrative is notably missing across all the findings. At times, *what* the students should be engaging with was articulated, but the *why* remained undefined and at the superficial level of simply being about *developing skills* and essentially securing *a job*.

These sentiments are echoed again below from the student perspective:

Employability, in order to be employable as such. It's good to have a degree, good to have the academic side but you also need experience in that field. For example, I was looking down the strength and conditioning route to do an MSc in strength and conditioning when I've finished this. In order to be a strength and conditioning coach, you need to volunteer... The volunteering experience is crucial.

Student, University B, case study 2016

Further evidence of this singular focus on gaining experience and getting a job amongst the student groups is evident below:

The more you do, if you had a piece of paper in front of someone and said 'this is what I've done' compared to someone else who might have a couple of paragraphs, you might have a list of something. They're going to look at that and think 'oh wow, look at this person who's got a hell of a lot more experience

and more stuff that they can bring to advantage us.' That's what people are looking for now...

Student, University B, case study 2016

...we all come to uni for a reason and it's more than likely going to be to gain a certain job at the end of the line. So, if you can get that then you've succeeded, haven't you?

Student, University A, case study 2016

Overall, these responses were typical across the student sample, with a focus on employment and securing employment, not looking longer term and not unpacking the concept more deeply than this (Tomlinson, 2017a). In order to get any job, there will be numerous factors that play a role. Gaining a job, is - as has been suggested - a surface-level view of the overall task, and what lies beneath needs much more careful consideration, as underpinning the ability to secure that job, and to then be able to go on to secure subsequent future positions and build a successful career. If developing lifelong learners is the ambition, the question must be asked whether students are currently being supported effectively (Higdon, 2016).

The risk is that without any deeper reflection on the intricacies that underpin successful performance in any given context, students will struggle in terms of awareness of what is important and the ability to articulate this effectively when needed. When it is known that a job is no longer for life (Hawkins, 1999), is enough being done to make this clear to our student cohorts, so that they might approach their studies and life more fluidly, flexibly and with this informed view?

I think employability nowadays, they want you to hit the ground running. They don't have the time or resources to train you... They want you to be in there to work straightaway. But obviously work experience is what they desperately need because they need someone to know the business...

Student, University A, case study 2016

Gaining experience was a recurring theme emerging from amongst the student sample, particularly around placements and volunteering; the need to be able to compete also comes through strongly, especially in the last two quotations. Tomlinson (2007) in his study observed a discourse in students around employability that was also based on gaining experience. It is not being suggested that gaining experience is not important, yet it is essential to recognise that these are not the only activities and areas important as part of students' personal development. There is a much broader mix of learning required in order to develop more holistically as a student and as a person, no matter what your age or background.

When students were questioned on where their views on employability had come from, one stated the following:

I think it's just hearing people talk about it because it is something that whilst you're in uni and you're talking to your friends who are doing the same or a similar course, you do talk about it. Like 'oh well what happens if I don't actually get to the point where I want to be?' ... I've spoken to my teachers back at home that have taught me. They were saying 'grab every opportunity you can because the more you do, the better you look.' And obviously they've been in the position that I'm in now where I want to go out and be what they are. So, they obviously know what other people are looking for...

Student, University B, case study 2016

This highlights once again how people derive their understanding and interpretations of employability, and are informed by those key stakeholders around them. This leads to consideration of sources of truth and where information is obtained that will inform an individual's understanding or beliefs, and therefore how they make decisions and behave. This quotation illustrates the impact that the advice this student had received years earlier from former teachers, whose words relating to gaining experience and taking opportunities when they present themselves still resonated with them. Higdon (2016), also noted in her research the impact of the advice from significant others prior to entering HE on how students understood and interpreted employability.

While expressed by a student at a different institution, the implications of not having support around employability is highlighted below:

...But going and getting employed, I don't think they've really helped us as much as maybe some people might like. There are some people who haven't a clue what they want to go into. They might just do the degree but then think 'I haven't been shown any paths which I can go down and do.' There are loads but some people might need extra help and I think the uni hasn't really supplied us with that.

Student, University B, case study 2016

This revisits the theme of whose responsibility all of this is. While it is accepted that universities should help students explore their future options, when students in this sample were asked who is responsible for employability, the majority responded by saying that it was themselves. When academics were asked the same question, they believed that they were responsible. So, is responsibility for this work falling between these two perspectives? It could be argued that both parties should share responsibility, but this being the case, is it discussed and made explicit, clarifying who is responsible for what, so that students may then work out what learning is expected of them and what they should be focusing their time and efforts on?

### **A disconnected agenda**

Understanding and interpretations of employability have clear implications for any subsequent measures of success. What, exactly, is being measured?

The following comment summarises the frustrations that exist amongst certain members of the academic community within this sample. When asked how they personally measured success in relation to their work in employability, one response was: "I don't have one. I couldn't give a crap how well I'm doing in terms of employability... I don't seek to measure it." Academic, University A, case study 2016.

Further detachment from the metrics is highlighted in the following quotations from other academics:

I don't know what my targets are for employability from that programme... at the minute, I don't know what my employability rates are in my programme, off the top of my head.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

I think they use it as marketing. Something that you're quite happy to say in front of students is actually we're a good university for employability... Again, I think it's important that we don't just talk about the fantastic achievements, like I mentioned [student name] before. Great, he's a fantastic success. But we might get a student that comes in at eighteen who's maybe from a disadvantaged background. He might have never been much opportunity his or her life and he might have certain confidence issues... He might not have been the most academic person, but if we can help them to maybe get a part time job with an NGB or even some voluntary work with someone I think that is classed as success to me... So, I think sometimes they only showcase the really good stuff... that's what attracts people to the university. If we sell that at Open Day, do you want to work in the Premiere League? We're not lying but he's one student in five years, whose come through and actually done it.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This highlights the importance of looking beyond the metrics to capture other measures of success that celebrate gains that are happening across the sector, and which numbers cannot do justice to. However, whether or not these stories would be effective in terms of helping attract future students is unknown.

The most common response to how success in employability was measured was cited as being the DLHE results, highlighting how this employment-related metric is influencing thinking at practice level, which supports the findings discussed in the previous chapter. The presence of the external league tables and publicly available data in the Key Information Set (KIS) on the course web pages for every programme in the country places a constant spotlight on an institution's performance in these metrics, and therefore sets an expectation for programme teams to respond. This presents the opportunity for celebrating current successes, for identifying room for

improvement, or for highlighting that results were not as expected, requiring action for the institution to improve its performance.

This is supported by the following:

I think we're probably a bit more unique in terms of our department as opposed to history of geography or whatever because I think it's easier for us to hit the employability targets.

Academic University B, case study, 2016

This is another example of where staff spoke about DLHE as being a direct measure of employability, a target, which it is not. This lack of understanding is clearly an issue. The suggestion that a sports degree then qualifies you for a particular job is also slightly misinformed, as most jobs in the sports industry do not specify what degree they need, much like many other sectors (ISE, 2017).

While recognising the place of DLHE, this academic articulated a somewhat more holistic view:

It's difficult. Externally, we're measured by the DHLE data. There are issues around the DHLE data, but that is a metric that we're held to, so it's quite difficult. It's subjective, isn't it, it's about whether you've seen progress and development in the student as a person. A lot of the staff will say it's about... whether they've grown up and taken ownership and responsibility. Have they engaged with opportunities? Can they identify opportunities? Do they know what they want to do and are they able to understand how they might find out about these opportunities or upskill themselves?.....we've been successful if... they can understand what their career aspirations might be. Taking ownership really for how they might develop themselves to reach those aspirations. We can put lots of opportunities on and they don't turn up to them. So, I think for me the success is them engaging with it. Actively seeking out opportunities, taking up the opportunities that are there and knowing what they want to get to...

Academic, University B, case study 2016

While the existence of DLHE is acknowledged here as a measure in relation to perceived success, the respondent also acknowledges a much wider range of underpinning factors, although how connected these are considered to be to their core learning by students is unknown. Ultimately, perhaps all of this is positive and highlights the need for a more diverse range of metrics that can help capture the value of activities that support and underpin DLHE, so that we might achieve a better understanding of what works in practice, and what associated learning opportunities are required at a more granular level.

The DLHE metrics potentially mask fundamental nuances around the specific features of employability that are not commonly recognised or discussed. From this perspective, the importance of reflection on the part of academics, not just students, is raised in the following quotation from University B, when an academic spoke about how their conversations with employers were informing their thinking and actions:

That was really for us an eye-opening thing, that they're looking at an individual as a whole individual. How he comes as a future colleague. When they employ someone, 'can I relate to this individual?' So, I think this personal touch is really important and we don't touch too much.

Academic, University B, case study 2016

This is a key observation, which - if actually unpacked - would turn out to be extremely complex. What does a '*whole individual*' mean exactly? Thinking about how they can '*relate to this individual*' really carries thinking beyond a more linear view of knowledge and skills acquisition and into how we can develop students more holistically as people, not solely for the workplace, but for their future lives (Barnett, 2011, Cole and Hallett, 2019, Jackson, 2008 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

However, if academics continue to demonstrate an understanding and speak about employability at a simplistic, surface level, and address it through a limited number of activities that are disconnected from core learning and teaching, will the changes necessary ever be achieved?



I think many people, whether they voice this or not, think like I do which is it's something that we always do anyway. It's always been part of a lecturing role, to embed employability into your courses. But it's a very vague, ill-defined thing. We can't necessarily say what employability is, we just have some kind of knowledge of things that we should be doing alongside. So added value to the degree. It's not just about the gradueness and the critical thinking and the soft subject areas and the very traditional subject areas, we also need to think now vocationally what will help these people survive in a work environment, what will help them to get a job, what will make them stand out from other candidates for jobs and things like this.... And that's not what a degree is. A degree is not a means to an end like that. It's not supposed to be.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

Highlighting similar experiences in the second case study institution:

And I think all of us are involved with the open days. I think one of the key things that we find, and we try to get across is to the parents. Because the parents come and I think what they want to know is after three years, will my son or daughter be employable?... What jobs are they going to get? What salaries are they going to be able to get?

Academic, University B, case study 2016

Here it is interesting to observe, again, the self-imposed boundaries by academics, who almost see employability as the enemy, and as something separate, distinct from the overall purpose of HE. There are uncertainties here too, suggesting that in HE embedding employability is what they do anyway, but what does this mean, exactly? If they haven't defined it, how can they embed it effectively? This point has been made several times within both findings chapters. From the academics' comments and resistance observed at times, it appears that their view of employability is linked primarily to the purpose of securing employment upon graduation. It has already been established that employability is much more than this, but here is an example of where such deep-rooted misunderstanding directly impacts on engagement with the employability agenda and on the attitude of this member of staff. With one academic

above suggesting that an ad-hoc approach is the reality, with a lack of a clear definition and uninformed by research. This misunderstanding, resistance and the resulting ad-hoc practice is unlikely to change and, if shared with colleagues, the cultural shift required becomes a very real challenge.

## **Summary**

This chapter highlights what, at times, is considered to be a limited understanding of employability and the associated discourse in this regard could be described as being narrow and restrictive. This does not reflect how employability is conceptualised in the research literature. This illustrates the importance and need for more diverse thinking and a much richer resulting narrative.

Yet several academics have demonstrated engagement with the employability agenda, so there is no consensus on what employability is and how best to address it in practice with students, beyond the focus on developing skills and gaining initial employment. The narrow views held by some academics has resulted in a perceived disconnect between employability and the core learning and teaching-related activities taking place in higher education. Instead, engaging with the Careers Service and offering students placements and opportunities to gain experience are viewed as essentially the main response to employability, with little mention of the wider value of learning across the curriculum itself for the student's future development. The narrow nature of the level of understanding demonstrated by academics requires further consideration if any kind of parity or consistency is to be achieved and in order to address employability more effectively both at a strategic and practice level in the future.

In the following chapter, the key themes that have emerged from both findings chapters will be discussed, continuing to respond to the research aims of this thesis. More specifically, seeking to examine current understanding of employability amongst leaders, academics and students, and reflecting on how this relates to the supporting literature. This leads to the development of a new taxonomy and organising framework that would support more effective approaches to employability in the future, recognising the value of learning across a broader range of spaces and experiences, for the purpose of developing a more diverse range of qualities and dispositions. This

would be, importantly, in addition to the baseline focus which already exists around knowledge and skills development.

# Chapter 7

## Discussion

### Introduction

In this chapter, the key findings from the research are explored in more depth, with links made to the literature where appropriate, considering specific patterns and themes. In particular, reference will be made to how the original research aim included in the introduction chapter has been addressed, which was to:

- Establish current understanding of employability at a strategic and practice level within sports-related degree programmes in higher education, and comparing these findings to the employability literature.

In doing so, the chapter reflects on the findings in addition to the wider national context that has been described in Chapter 2. Here, the focus on skills is discussed, and consideration is given to the problematic nature of this focus as an area for development in HE, and as way of a suitable response to the employability agenda.

The final sections of this chapter present a new conceptual position for employability, primarily in response to the second of the research aims, which stated:

- To produce a *framework / model* which could support how to address employability more effectively in the future.

Based on the findings of this study, and again considering the wider literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy is presented and for the first time explained as a framework that offers both strategic and practical value for future approaches to employability.

### Key findings and considerations

Each of the three key findings included below will be considered in more detail, and collectively they serve as the response to the original research aim:

1. Limited understanding and narrow interpretations of employability
2. Employability currently positioned as a disconnected agenda
3. Lack of alignment between the understanding of employability and the conceptual models

#### *1. Limited understanding and narrow interpretations of employability*

Findings from both the national survey and the two case studies demonstrate that understanding and the associated discourse around employability is variable at both a strategic and practice level, with the terms *employment* and *employability* commonly being used interchangeably. Evidence of this is observed across multiple sources. In the national survey, at least one academic from each sampled institution interpreted *employability* in terms of *job / employment*. In the case studies, the strategy of University A stated an explicit focus on the employment of their students (University A website, March 2018), while in University B's strategic level documentation makes explicit mention of a focus on both employment and employability (University B corporate strategy, 2013-18 online). However, whether there is an appreciation of the distinctions between the two terms is not always clear.

In both case studies, most of the students sampled held views of employability closely aligned to gaining *employment* and focused on securing that first job, as opposed to demonstrating an understanding of employability in a much broader and more holistic sense. Here, the relationship between strategy and practice becomes critical, as leaders, academics and students all commonly failed to recognise more diverse areas of learning that are highlighted in the underpinning employability literature, and which are fundamental to supporting their future success across a range of contexts, including, but not limited to employment. This is summarised in the key finding that employability is often positioned as a disconnected agenda, discrete from core learning and teaching-related activities.

Understanding and the interchangeable use of the terms *employment* and *employability* is raised as key within this thesis, since this also aligns with several sources in the literature that have also highlighted the differences between the two terms and how they are used (BIS 2011, Blackmore et al., 2016, Cole and Hallett,

2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Harvey 2003, Tomlinson, 2017a and Yorke 2006). This matters, because to be addressed effectively, employment and employability require similar but different actions. To use the terms interchangeably or without demonstration of an understanding of the differences overlooks these distinctions and therefore omits areas of learning that may be critical to a student's longer-term future success.

The inconsistency in understanding and the resulting discourse is highlighted because universities are such large and complex organisations, often working with student numbers in the tens of thousands. Therefore, to ensure the highest possible standards, experience and appropriate opportunity for all students, there is a need for a level of consistency, or at least parity in provision. With such inconsistent levels of understanding and with a variable discourse on employability evidenced at institutional level, parity is unlikely to be achieved.

The following sections will explore this inconsistency as an issue from the perspective of the different participant roles within this study, where individuals viewed employability as primarily being concerned with first destination employment, securing that initial job after graduating, as cited above.

### Leaders

Senior leaders in positions of authority, power and influence within institutions collectively set the tone and direction of travel at strategic level. Commonly articulated via university strategy, marketing and their websites, the understanding and subsequent discourse adopted here outlines a position or line that is taken by the institution on any given topic or issue. Leaders operating within the schools, faculties and colleges are then required to respond to whatever strategic direction has been articulated, with attached key performance indicators as the ongoing measure of success, often across a wide variety of areas. Direction and focus are set at strategic level with the expectation that they will be addressed at a local or programme level. The question here is, are those leading in HE focusing on the right areas? By way of an example, leaders at both institutions A and B spoke about the *employability figures* and *employability rates* when referring to the DLHE data, often viewing the short-term

employment rates of graduates as the area of focus, as opposed to considering other underpinning measures of success that might subsequently highlight a more diverse range of learning activities to be recognised - and therefore valued - in supporting this strategic agenda.

This is important, because the position that is adopted at strategic level ultimately determines the level and type of resourcing provided in practice, including the number and profiles of staff allocated with the responsibility to lead and deliver on the institution's objectives. This is significant, since ultimately this is likely to impact on the final outcome and potential success.

With *employability* being one consideration for leaders amongst many others, including research, reputation, retention, progression and attainment and student satisfaction, there are certainly constant and multiple pressures across the HE environment.

If senior leaders understood employability more holistically, looking beyond first destination employment, what difference would this make in the subsequent strategy, plans and learning-related actions and delivery that occurs? This could significantly shift the focus, not necessarily completely away from employment, but to a broader landscape where not only employment is considered, but also a longer-term view of a graduate's potential, whether in terms of a job, starting their own business or going on to further study. This, in turn, shifts attention to the kinds of qualities and dispositions necessary to support an individual in being successful in these more varied contexts. As a result, this most certainly widens the related discourse beyond the common focus today, which often lands in an over-simplified narrative of *skills*, then clumsily articulated as the *skills gap*.

There were individual examples of a much richer understanding and discourse within the leader sample. One leader at University A articulated employability in terms of *capabilities, assets and strengths*, recognising the *multi-faceted* nature of the concept. This was supported by another leader at University B, who described employability as being about *more than a job and skills* and should include consideration of areas such as *attitude and other attributes* in their opinion. Both, however, did not specify what

each of these terms meant to them, so whilst positive, they remain ambiguous and open to interpretation by other leaders, academics and their students.

If a broader, more inclusive view of employability was to be adopted more widely, then this would likely impact on associated resourcing, not only in terms of capacity, but also relevant and specific expertise. For example, is the employability agenda best led by the Head of Careers, or a senior academic working in the learning and teaching portfolio? This decision is significant, as the first option is commonly associated with a support staff of 20-100 employees. If, however there is closer alignment with the learning and teaching agenda, this would be associated with a resource often numbering over a thousand employees. If the desire is to truly make a difference to all students, this strategic-level alignment is critical, and understanding and interpretation of employability is a key factor in influencing it. Alliances and partnerships may be formed in practice, such as hybrid versions of the two positions just outlined, but who the senior and tactical lead for employability is will establish the tone. If this is the Head of the Careers service, this opens the door for the academic community to potentially see this key agenda as not being their responsibility at all, maintaining the disconnect from their day to day duties. Evidence of this disconnect was certainly evident with academics in both the case studies and the national survey.

### Academics

If academics interpret employability as *employment*, then there are a range of activities and interventions that may be provided through the associated curriculum and wider programme. Evidence of this was observed where academics highlighted how they worked directly with the Careers Service or had embedded placements and work experience into their modules. This work focused on improving the student's chances of gaining employment. Further examples of this employment focus were highlighted by several survey participants. One academic wrote: "Employability is the readiness of an individual to gain employment". (Academic, University A, national survey 2015). This position aligns with that articulated by several leaders, too, where DLHE and the employment metrics were viewed as an institutional measure of success in relation to employability. This evidences the potential link between the understanding of



employability and the approach of HE institutions, leaders and academics at both a strategic and practice level.

There is another position here, where academics may be perceived as being dismissive of the entire *employability agenda*, viewing the purpose of higher education as not being about either *employment* or *employability*, calling employability a nonsense term and admitting to being openly cynical. This, in practice, completely detaches them from the agenda, and responsibility. Reflecting on the findings from the sample of HEI leaders, this pushback may be suggested to be as a result of the explicit and strategic drive to ensure that all students gain a professional or managerial level job after graduating, which is, from certain individual's perspectives, reducing the purpose of HE to being merely to help students secure a job. This more extreme viewpoint from academics was observed in a relatively small but notable number that were participants in the case study focus groups. However, almost unanimously, participants at this level admitted that they held a view of employability that was not directly informed by employability-related research. This is therefore an area that will be discussed later in the chapter, as this clearly relates to the first research aim stated in this thesis.

In these examples, where there is such variable understanding of *employability*, what is likely to be the impact on the students' thinking and behaviour towards this area of work? If the messaging around employability is not positioned in a positive or valid way, the likelihood is that students will not engage. This is an important consideration, and the inconsistencies that exist in the understanding and resulting discourse are critical if there is a desire to develop a more effective future approach.

### Students

Where students also interpreted employability as primarily concerned with gaining employment, the focus of their learning was correspondingly aligned to this specific objective. For example:

...we all come to uni for a reason and it's more than likely going to be to gain a certain job at the end of the line. So, if you can get that then you've succeeded, haven't you?

Here students were most commonly focused on gaining experience and developing a set of what several participants referred to as *job-related skills*. As such, these instantly became the areas understood to be most important, alongside the student's focus on gaining knowledge in their selected subject area. Here there appears to be a link between the understanding of employability commonly shared by the academics in the national survey and participants in both case studies. Suggesting a possible relationship between student and academic understanding of employability. In the same way as a relationship may be also be suggested to exist between those views expressed by leaders in this study and the academics participants.

Where students expressed this type of view, they considered employability as being best addressed through placements, part-time work and securing coaching badges, with all these activities most commonly residing outside the curriculum itself. At a surface level, students were unable to recognise the value of how the curriculum also supported their employability, somehow disconnecting these areas of learning. Given the inconsistent and what might be considered misaligned discourse employed by some leaders and staff in this respect, any student failure to see the curriculum and their contact time with tutors as also supporting their employability is perhaps unsurprising - particularly when students reported that employability was not explicitly defined to them through their programmes.

With such a narrow focus in places, and lack of clarity in others, it could be argued that students are failing to recognise the learning and detail that underpins the eventual employment outcome, and the breadth and value of experiences and opportunities they have before them, as illustrated by the student at University A who only recognised the coaching module and qualifications as contributions to their future employability.

At times, in both case studies, these messages were reinforced at least in part by employers, parents, former tutors in school or further education, who were cited as having highlighted to the students the importance of gaining experience. Whilst obviously an important consideration, this over-simplistic or singular focus omits the

actual purpose of gaining that experience in the first place, and the complexities, nuances and outcomes of investing and learning in this area. The very same complexities, nuances and outcomes that are contained within the conceptual models of employability discussed in this thesis e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and Tomlinson (2017), and which largely remain implicit and unspoken of in the associated narrative of employability amongst participants in this study.

Despite narrow views being articulated by many participants, there were several students who also began to reflect on the wider implications of employability a little more deeply when questioned, going on to articulate how employers were also looking for individuals with the right attitude, personality and behaviours. For example:

...but nowadays when I'm looking at jobs, they're always talking about being enthusiastic and being a people person. So, personality wise you need to be this vibrant kind of person as well.

Student, University A, case study 2016

They didn't care about past experiences or qualifications. They just wanted to know how you are as a person. If you're a decent person and get along with people, then you got the job.

Student, University B, case study 2016

While positive to a degree, neither of these statements was expanded on, in the same way that those academics and leaders who articulated a more complex view of employability did not clarify their thoughts, making their statements vague and undefined. Such ambiguity gives rise to the question of whether these students knew how to then best approach developing in these specific areas? Overall, this highlights the importance of understanding employability more effectively. If areas for development remain undefined and implicit, then students will continue to be unaware of the importance of engaging in the first place, being unable to articulate the true depth and value of these learning experiences beyond the simple fact that they have spent time with an employer in a working context.

A more comprehensive discourse around *employability* presents an opportunity for students to potentially engage more effectively with the associated areas of learning that might better nurture a broader range of qualities and dispositions. If these learning objectives have simply not been articulated and their value not explained, then students will remain uninformed, essentially limiting their future employability by focusing attention on a more restrictive set of learning activities centred around careers education, skills and gaining experience to secure that first destination role. This might be described as a surface-level approach to employability, drawing parallels with the work of Biggs (1999) around this concept of learning.

Overall, this confused scenario is unlikely to change for students while leadership, infrastructure and systems remain as they are. It has been recognised that across each of the case study institutions there were individuals in each of the sample groups who articulated a more nuanced narrative around employability, yet there was nothing visibly present to lead and connect these individuals or their views. They existed as lone voices in a landscape dominated by the more common employment and skills driven discourse. Although, very few of these more positive and refined views were rooted in the conceptual models and definitions of employability published in the employability-related research.

If this scenario remains the status quo, student views of what it is they should be focusing on, in terms of their learning, is likely to remain fixed around the dominant narrative of experience, skills and job.

With similarities established between each of the participant groups, there is a need to broaden the level of understanding of employability to bring about a shift in the discourse, from one that is commonly articulated as solely employment-focused to one where more holistic learning to support success across a wider range of contexts is recognised. This shift needs to begin at a strategic level and continue through into practice, creating a connected and integrated approach to learning that would better support the employability development of students in the future.

## *2. Employability positioning*

As has been discussed, participants' understanding and interpretation of employability has been highlighted, along with the resulting discourse, as a key consideration for developing a more effective future approach employability in HE. In this section, the potential factors that have influenced this understanding and discourse are discussed, demonstrating how this agenda has become disconnected: commonly seen as a discrete area of activity that resides outside the core business of higher education (that of teaching, learning and research). Evidence of this was seen in the national survey, with one academic respondent stating that their institution adopted a *laissez-faire* approach, i.e. just let the careers service get on with it. This suggests that this individual viewed the employability agenda as being the main responsibility of the Careers Service. This is supported by the following quotation in the findings:

I think there's the tension from the teaching staff, that tension between teaching their subject that is their passion and relating it to employability or seeing employability as integrated to it when they might see that as being somebody else's job.

Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016

While responsibility for the employability agenda may be contested, it has emerged as a priority area of work for a variety of reasons and at the highest level. The British Government has demonstrated its vested interest in *employability* for decades (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012). With a clear national interest signalled here, it is no surprise that eight years later, with HEFCE having ceased to exist and the OfS now in place as the regulatory body, student outcomes and perceived value for money remain at the forefront of their thinking. The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework is evidence of a continued focus on the employment outcomes of students and all associated metrics and league tables, and, by proxy, an interest in employability. Overall, this highlights the relevance and currency of this thesis to this day.

With the DLHE having now been redesigned and the new output now being the *Graduate Outcomes survey*, the likelihood is that this metric will continue to be viewed by many as a proxy for employability in the UK. Bridgstock (2009) highlights a similar

scenario in Australia, going on to highlight that this short-term focus on *employment*, rather than *employability* is problematic. As highlighted at the start of this chapter, the narrative around employment is certainly at the forefront in many people's minds, as was evidenced through both the national survey and case study findings, the employment-based metrics then further amplifying this focus and creating pressure on universities to respond, designing activities to support graduates into employment as quickly as possible.

For senior leaders in HE, their careers are almost certainly intertwined with the impact that they are perceived to have driven in their institutions, their achievements measured in terms of high-profile data not only for employment, but also relating to the student experience through the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS), and through student access into Higher Education, retention, progression and attainment throughout their studies. These metrics dominate the media and government thinking, with countless reports and strategies produced in relation to each area. With such pressures to perform compounded at the highest level, the views expressed by leaders in the case studies, and the resulting focus articulated through the universities' strategic documentation and website may be considered unsurprising.

To illustrate this point, one leader at University A stated that employability matters because the government has created a competitive market, and therefore their HEI's position in the associated league tables is important to them.

This situation clearly influences university strategy, where and what resources are allocated and how performance is subsequently measured for staff, programme teams and school, college or faculty leadership. Again, in University A, another senior leader cited the opportunity to use this data to drive behaviour with programme teams, encouraging the notion of competition where league table performance was viewed as the measure of success, creating a need to act to enhance current practice and reinforcing a culture where understanding of employability will continue to be associated with employment.

With these metrics and league tables well established, the message and narrative that students should be securing graduate level employment is quite clear, creating pressure on both staff and students to achieve against a national measure of success.

The umbrella view of how success is measured does not account for much of the work on employability that student support and academics are currently providing to students to individualise and personalise their learning experiences, encouraging students to make sense of how their learning will best support their own personally defined future life aspirations (including career), and what success looks like to them individually, in the context of their own lives.

It is suggested that there is a need to better understand the factors that impact on both *employment* and *employability*, and to achieve this understanding requires other measures of success to be considered, valued and more widely adopted. This highlights the need for supporting performance indicators to underpin the key performance indicators. With greater insight into the variables underpinning performance in employment measures, a spotlight would be placed on the very areas that constitute the conceptual models of employability published in the literature. By valuing other areas of work in practice, beyond the current activities focused simply on the headline employment numbers, for the first time in the HE sector it may be possible to develop a true understanding of what works for employability.

### *3. Understanding v conceptual models of employability*

The final and perhaps most significant of the key findings is that there is currently a lack of engagement with the conceptual models of employability that exist in the literature by staff operating at all levels. This is significant because, without a point of reference that is research-informed, approaches at both a strategic and practice level will continue to be based simply on common sense and experience, making consistency also almost impossible to achieve. For example, one academic stated the following when asked where their views had come from:

I'd definitely say it's more experience. It's not really about what we've learnt in terms of a model or anything like that. I've come from a background working outside of academia, so I think I had a good idea about what industry demands.

Academic, University A, case study 2016

As previously cited in the findings chapter, only three staff in total, across both the academic and leader samples in both case studies, referred to specific research and literature that had influenced their interpretation of employability, with common sense, experience and other colleagues being the most frequently cited sources of influence.

Therefore, conceptually, theoretically and in practice, there is no standard or consistent approach that could be said to be research-informed from the participants within this study. With many contrasting views competing in this landscape, the resulting practices intended to address employability often align with the interpretation of those specific individuals who are empowered to set strategy at institutional level or design their own curriculums at practice level. For example, this leader at University A stated the following, describing the origins of their own understanding of employability:

...there'll be conferences, there will be internal meetings and discussions where you're sense making collectively, really, about our interpretations of what it means.

Leader, University A, case study 2016

Admittedly, currently little or no research exists on strategic approaches to employability, which was one of the drivers for embarking on this research in the first place. Nearly ten years later, this still remains the case. However, conceptual models of employability have been published and available for well over a decade, and while anecdotally careers services engaging with careers-based research is commonplace, there is little to no evidence published in the literature on institutions engaging at a strategic level with conceptual models of employability. At the time of writing this, through both the literature review and existing relationship I have with colleagues working in a number of countries around the world, there is only limited evidence of four institutions engaging at a strategic level with the employability research and conceptual models of employability in practice, three in the UK and one in Australia. Given the strategic importance of this agenda, especially at a national level with government, it is surprising that this body of research has been largely ignored when developing current strategic and practice level approaches to employability.



Looking across the conceptual models of employability and their component features, there are clearly similarities and differences, and this was discussed in the literature review chapter. Adopting this more strategic view of the features of employability across the models examined highlights several factors that are currently influencing - and limiting, in some cases - the potential impact of the employability agenda. This highlights the value of the literature review as a method for forming the assertions and conclusions presented in this thesis. The influencing factors include:

- There is no skills-based model of employability, yet this understanding dominates the associated discourse
- Employability is about much more than simply skills and experiential learning
- Employability is about more than gaining a single job or employment
- The constituent features of employability are potentially the outcomes of a wide range of learning opportunities, such as developing self-confidence through participation in sport or volunteering, or resilience through group work and live projects
- The value of these constituent features to the individual apply beyond the context of work, having value in life more broadly

(Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a)

If these factors remain unaddressed by key stakeholders in HE, then the effectiveness of any future approaches will continue to be limited. Most importantly, perhaps, value of current practice and how it may already be contributing will remain unrecognised. With finite resources to support students, it is critical that the true value of the learning opportunities already in place and happening in practice needs to be maximised. With a shift in the discourse and expert leadership this becomes a possibility.

The skills focus in the discourse has been examined extensively throughout this thesis, but if there continue to be individuals expressing views such as the following, then the urgent need to engage with the underpinning theory and literature in this arena is only further ratified. “So, employability is the skills that they need to develop to move into graduate level employment.” Senior leader, University A, case study 2016. Given that

an association has previously been suggested between the narrow understanding and views of leaders and academics, and the impact that this may have in practice with students, this certainly requires further reflection.

Recapping for a moment, this section provides an overview of the key findings of this thesis and responds to the two research aims previously stated. Each of these findings has been outlined in more detail in an attempt to set the wider context and highlight the specific purpose, place and value of the Dimensions for Learning taxonomy, which was developed in direct response to the key challenges identified.

### **Policy, politics and pedagogy**

As has previously been discussed, the government has made very clear its interest in the employability agenda, highlighted in the Dearing Report (1997) and the Leitch Review (2006), with Yorke (2006) articulating the motivations behind this interest in terms of the perceived value of HE in developing the skills to ensure the UK economy remains competitive. With the OfS now having a direct remit to hold institutions to account for their performance in TEF and securing graduate employment, as measured by the new Graduate Outcomes data, this area of work looks set to continue to remain a priority focus for the foreseeable future.

This government-led discourse was frequently replayed by participants in the case studies and national survey. They commonly cited the word *skills* in their responses when asked to define what employability meant to them - the most common responses across the entire national survey sample being related to *skills and gaining a job*. Here, once again, the potential links between different groups of stakeholders was apparent, with leaders' views suggested to have the potential to impact on academic views, and how, in turn, academics' views may be influencing how students interpret employability. Therefore, high-level government interpretation and subsequent discourse around employability may be suggested to be impacting on university leaders, strategy and practice at the institutional level.

Despite this restrictive discourse commonly being the focus, there is a significant amount of literature which is critical of the skills agenda, as discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 (e.g. Cole and Hallett, 2019, Higdon, 2016, Holmes, 2001 and Yorke, 2006).

When discussing the use of the term *skills*, especially within the Dearing Report (1997), Yorke (2006:11) highlights the problematic nature of this approach when he states: “The Dearing approach to key skills is symptomatic of a widespread failure to underpin key skills with theory”.

In fact, the *skills-based* approach has been strongly criticised since the 1990s, as previously highlighted (Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000 and Wolf, 1991 cited in Holmes, 2001:112). More recently, Tomlinson (2017a) cites literature including Mason et al. (2009) and Wilton (2011), stating that there is evidence that a skills focus formally addressed in HE has limited benefits on a graduate’s future employability. Holmes (2001:112) goes on to highlight how *behaviour* and *performance* are more preferable aspirations for HE work than skills per se. These sentiments are also supported by Minten (2010), who makes specific reference to graduates from sports programmes and highlights the need to be looking beyond skills. Highlighting further issues with a skills-based narrative, Cole and Hallett (2019: 122) refer to the Financial Services Skills Council (2006) (cited in Kumar, 2007), which again illustrates the confusion that exists in terms of the current discourse, resulting in it being challenging to understand what employers actually need.

There is a considerable body of literature cited here that critiques the skills-focused response to the employability agenda. Yet this interpretation continues to dominate. This focus was clearly observed in the understanding and resulting discourse in both the national survey and the case studies in this research, where there were numerous examples of individual leaders, academics and students articulating the focus of their learning and development in terms of skills. In this way the findings of this research very much highlight the challenge that this national level discourse can create, to the extent of causing a misalignment in the setting of objectives for learning and desired outcomes from education.

Cole and Hallett (2019:12) elaborate further, explaining why this misalignment is such an issue:

This preoccupation with skills and employment status has become problematic in relation to higher education for a number of reasons. Firstly, and most commonly realised, it is very difficult, especially in the rapidly changing world of

work and trade, to keep pace with the technical or job specific skills that are required from higher education. Secondly, if skills are addressed as the primary focus then other facets and features of employability.... will be marginalised. Thirdly, engaging higher education staff, especially academic staff, with the skills agenda can be extremely challenging, because of the contrasting ways in which academic and scholarly practices are defined. For many academics and higher education professionals, a skills mantra is considered a claustrophobic and reductive grid, imposed carelessly on the holistic development of the student, distilling a complex, creative and uncertain process into a set of industry prescribed objectives and outcomes.

With an association being made between *skills* and *employment* throughout this research, this may certainly be attributed as being a potential influence on the subsequent engagement of individuals in the employability agenda overall, and the learning activities designed as a result. In addition, other features of employability did appear to be marginalised, with very few leaders, academics or students articulating their views relating to employability in terms of *attitude* or *behaviour* for example, and certainly not to the level of detail articulated in the conceptual models in the literature.

Where there are such high stakes involved, in terms of staff and student engagement in this strategic agenda, the understanding of this concept and positioning of this work is a critical consideration. However, achieving positive change will not be straightforward, as Cole and Hallett (2019:122) articulate:

Moving beyond the narrow lens of skills will require a cultural shift in the thinking and language deployed on a daily basis, and there is an urgent need to reposition and reframe the employability agenda.

With many authors highlighting the importance of reflecting on the narrative surrounding employability, more specifically the nuances that underpin this concept (Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Higdon, 2016, Holmes, 2001 and Tomlinson, 2017a), an evolution of the current discourse is long overdue. To add to these tensions, there was certainly evidence in both the national survey and the case studies of the resistance that exists in certain academics' minds on the place of employability in higher education. Yet over ten years ago, the *Pedagogy for*

*Employability Group* (2006) highlighted how employability and subject-specific learning should be complimentary, and how pedagogy should be developed that addresses both areas simultaneously. This is a further example of the literature in employability having had little impact in practice.

The opportunity to focus on learning in a more holistic manner is created here. For example, are efficacy beliefs, emotional intelligence (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Knight and Yorke, 2004) or personal adaptability and human capital (Fugate et al., 2004) the domains of *employability* and the workplace, or are they simply qualities and abilities developed through good learning and teaching, for the benefit of all aspects of an individual's life, in the workplace and beyond? Could the assertion be made here, that the employability agenda is merely highlighting the fact that something may potentially be missing from our current pedagogical approaches, and that there is simply a need for a richer, more considered and diverse approach to learning and teaching? This was certainly supported by one academic cited from University B, who recognised the direct relationship between employability and learning and teaching.

The focus of HE on knowledge acquisition has previously been raised, yet Brown et al. (2002) state that the academic qualification itself is simply the first tick in a box before the employers then look for more. Yet, what is the *more* in this case? Supporting this stance, again the *Pedagogy for Employability Group* (2006) highlight how most jobs are open to graduates from any disciplines, indicating strongly that employers are seeking much more than the qualification and associated subject knowledge.

Taking these combined factors into account, alongside the now high-profile nature of the employment metrics and associated league tables, the growth of the employability agenda has been rapid. Today this area of work has clearly developed its own identity, seen by many as a discrete area of work typically led by Careers Services. Leadership of the employability agenda at a strategic level from this particular service is likely to only continue to see employability and employment being viewed as one and the same, and a close association with the development of *skills* as the desired outcome.

This section highlights the problematic nature of this scenario, where the response to employability is understood and then articulated via a skills-focused discourse for the purpose of employment, subsequently directing resources and action intended to

support skills development, despite the considerable body of literature cited here that is critical of the focus on skills per se. This reinforces the urgent need for change, for the employability agenda to be repositioned in order to enhance better understanding of this concept amongst all stakeholder groups, including government, and directing attention away from the narrow focus on skills alone, extending it into a wider and richer tapestry of qualities and dispositions critical to support individual success in a range of contexts, including, but not limited to, employment.

### **Developing theory and practice**

In 2017 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned a review of the literature published between 2013 and 2017. This was conducted by Artess et al. (2017). This review was structured using the HEA's Embedding Employability in Higher Education Framework (Cole and Tibby, 2013 and revised version in 2015). This structure was adopted to ascertain what supporting literature directly related to employability was available in each of the areas specified within the HEA framework.

What was evident in looking across the wider body of research surrounding employability was that most of the research had a direct association with skills and first destination employment, echoing the dominant understanding and discourse captured from academics and leaders in this thesis and echoed by government and the media more widely. There was a lack of research on more nuanced areas of learning, directly associated with supporting employability, such as emotional intelligence, self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem, resilience and creativity. All of this presents an opportunity to bring together the body of literature associated with employability and the body of literature associated with pedagogy, learning and teaching. Breaking down barriers between these fields might just breathe new life into what has become a somewhat stagnant and limited employability arena.

Through the national survey and two case studies, it was evident that leaders and academics were not engaging with existing literature, and specifically the conceptual models of employability that have been published. These individuals were not questioned further at this stage on why they had not done so. However, if academics, leaders and students were to engage with the employability literature, which model, definition or article would they engage with? Across the wider body of employability

literature there is clearly a great deal of variety, which was mirrored in the discourse from the participants in this research. Perhaps the fact that there are a number of definitions and models actually creates further confusion here? This lack of clarity is supported by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), who critique other published models, suggesting that they are often either too complex or too simple to be of real value. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and Yorke and Knight (2006a) go on to raise concern that the over-simplistic view of employability being about securing a job or merely developing a collection of individual skills is problematic, supporting the assertions being made in this thesis and further evidencing the finding that research that has existed for over a decade but appears to have had little impact in practice. Furthermore, Bridgstock (2009) and Minten (2010) stress how employability is about more than gaining a job, again demonstrating that this research is not new.

The USEM model of employability developed by Knight and Yorke (2004) came about due to the perceived need to engage academia with the concept of employability. However, the sheer complexity of this model (by the authors' own admission), potentially limited the practical value it could ultimately have. With employability today being defined as something perhaps distinct from the everyday practices of academics, this may have inadvertently created a detachment from this agenda for many in the academic community.

There has been no documented work on applying the conceptual models of employability in practice, and as previously stated, nothing yet has been written about strategic approaches to employability in the literature, or that makes reference to these areas in relation to undergraduate sports programmes. These models remain positioned only at a conceptual level, but why is that? One likely reason, looking beyond their immediate complexity, may be due to the respective authors not being employed within an institution where they have the authority or appropriate role to embed their own work in practice or at scale. This is clearly an area that needs further reflection if the employability agenda in HE is ever to be advanced. This is later presented as an opportunity for future research.

The employability agenda needs to be positioned more effectively in the future, in a way that potentially engages all stakeholders and which is considerate not only of the needs of graduates in securing gainful employment in some form, but also takes into

account the factors that are likely to impact on their success in life more broadly, beyond the workplace context alone. This would begin to engage those case study participants who at least acknowledged the more complex nature of employability but did not have sufficient detail to be able to translate it into practice. The following sections introduce areas for consideration in terms of how this position might be evolved, beginning with outlining the rationale, reasoning and value of addressing the second of the research aims, which was to: *produce a framework / model that can support addressing employability more effectively in the future.*

### **Defining and embedding a new narrative**

Individual understanding of employability by students, academics and leaders has been at the heart of this thesis, and to move their position forward, the fundamental question remains: will employability ever truly be understood in relation to the published research? The findings presented in this thesis demonstrate the problematic nature of the term *employability*, ranging from complete resistance to engaging with the concept, to where there is some engagement based on a narrow understanding, with employability being interpreted as the acquisition of an ambiguous set of skills for the purpose of securing employment.

Our proposal is that there is a need for a conceptual shift and a rhetorical challenge to the language of employability. Both are needed to unsettle and diversify a discourse of employability that is still dominated by claustrophobic skills and employment agendas. A dominant skills-led language necessarily impinges on higher education and institutional thinking about employability....

Cole and Hallett (2019: 126)

As one of the cited authors, I can confirm that this suggestion emerged as a direct result of the combined findings of this doctoral research, and highlights the need for action for HE and those leading sports degree programmes to address employability more effectively.

In support of this view, Tomlinson (2017a: 348) suggests:



There is, however, a need to think more broadly and conceptually about graduate employability and introduce new vocabularies that connect with its relational complexities and also graduates' lived experiences through and beyond HE.

There is a clearly a need to broaden the discourse beyond the narrow focus on employment commonly found with participants in the national survey and case studies, and there is a need for all stakeholders to become engaged with achieving the more diverse desired outcomes required to support graduate employability. However, given the wide-ranging interpretation (or misinterpretation) of this term, *employability* may not be the most effective descriptor for HE and external stakeholders to be using. The findings of this research have demonstrated several academics referring to the *employability metrics* and *employability league tables*, when asked to define employability, and leaders and students confuse the two terms *employment* and *employability*, which have become so closely associated that re-establishing clarity between them may be an impossible task.

Based on the findings in this thesis and the research published to date, the suggestion here is a more meaningful, yet far from radical, approach is required. Developing a new discourse and repositioning the employability agenda may create an opportunity to achieve greater clarity and secure better engagement from stakeholders across all quarters.

HEIs commonly create siloed ways of working, with individuals given job titles or responsibility for leading agendas, chasing metrics-focused targets, often in isolation from others. Collaborative working is then left to chance, rather than being a planned and intended consequence. The development of Careers and Employability Services in nearly every HE institution in the UK is, at least in part, a good example of this. With a complex, strategic area of work being allocated to those tasked with improving a student's employment prospects, yet whom often have limited resources at their disposal. Employability would perhaps be better positioned, from both a resourcing and student access perspective, as a feature of an institutional approach to learning and teaching, supported by Careers and Employability expertise, and adding to the current pedagogical offering. This would inject a critical dimension into student

programmes without detracting from the primary purpose of HE, which most would argue fundamentally centres around learning.

By focusing on employment metrics, actions are currently taken to enhance the student's ability to gain that first destination job as a positive outcome, and subsequent opportunities are not a consideration. The attention is on short-term results, and this was cited numerous times by both leaders and academics in the sample. While the introduction of the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data, alongside the slightly longer-term Graduate Outcomes data (in comparison to DLHE), attempt to stretch the frame of reference over an extended period, the league tables, headlines and glory remain firmly rooted in the shorter term, first destination professional and managerial level employment percentage success rates of institutions.

To improve this situation, a shift is required. Currently, the primary focus is solely on what the student knows and can do, and what job they can effectively function in, rather than also considering who the students are as individuals, and what qualities and dispositions they possess. This was evidenced by leaders and academics in the sample, who commonly cited skills, rather than attitude or behaviour, in terms of desired outcomes. Boyatzis and Saatcioglu (2008:94) highlight these distinctions:

These three domains of capability or talent (i.e. knowledge, competencies, and motivational drivers) help us to understand what a person can do (i.e. knowledge), how a person can do it (i.e. competencies), and why a person feels the need to do it (i.e. values, motives, and unconscious dispositions).

"Why a person feels the need to do it", is being equated to 'who' we want to be, and while the first two domains of capability or talent are clearly present in the HE system today, as supported by the findings of this research, where and how is the 'who' perspective cited above being addressed? This was certainly less evident in the findings.

By shifting the focus of HE towards a more holistic conceptualisation of learning, a wide range of new possibilities are opened up (Smith et al., 2018). More specifically, the possibilities which emerge from both the findings of this research and the literature review, which together directly informed the development of the Dimensions for Learning taxonomy, including the following:

**1. Valuing *contextual learning* as a concept and recognising more diverse range of areas of learning by valuing and measuring other areas of work, within the curriculum and beyond.** This would highlight to students the importance of these areas in supporting them in life in general, not just in a working context. In this scenario, a clearer understanding may be developed of what works in supporting a student's future success, learning about the impact of a wider range of variables and therefore developing greater capability and knowledge of the value of each contextual area of work.

**2. Adopting a more holistic view of learning that moves to a position more in line with many individuals' existing views of the purpose of HE: that it should be about learning, and not merely about gaining a job.** Stakeholders would then be better positioned to unite in a shared direction of travel, tackling any resistance and the often singular focus on a working environment. Contextual learning around the world of work, would ultimately be positioned as part of a more holistic approach to learning and alongside a broader more diverse menu of other learning opportunities that extend far beyond subject learning alone. This addresses the concerns expressed by academics in the sample and captured in research more widely, who have questioned the place of the employability agenda in HE at all.

**3. Uniting stakeholders would present an institution with a more realistic opportunity to achieve scale and reach in its work.** Reaching and engaging all students is the ambition here, not only those who will naturally self-select and engage with additional learning opportunities and the potential benefits of doing so. This also tackles the issue of consistency raised in the findings of this research.

**4. Viewing learning as evolutionary.** The notion of fluidity in relation to learning from Barnett (2011) and Fugate et al. (2004) should be a key consideration. Here, learning is not fixed, but is constantly evolving, depending on the environment and context. This addresses the limitations of simply seeking to address a static list of skills that somehow everyone should possess. It shifts the focus to achieving a more dynamic state, for example, focusing more on areas such as personal adaptability, proactivity, career identity, human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2004). With a grounding including qualities such as this, fluidity might be realised. This approach also

challenges the more formulaic, fixed and linear equation that was articulated by some participants in the sample, and more broadly by government at the national level, which assumes if the students leave with knowledge, some generic skills and experience, this will then enable them to neatly match to a first destination job (Taylor, 2017). The reality is far more nuanced and complex than that, with many other variables that need to be taken into consideration. This critique is further supported by the work of Cole and Hallett (2019).

**5. Aligning the strategic approach to learning and teaching, employability, retention and attainment and other such institutional level challenges in a more integrated way that aligns with the research and conceptual models of employability, provides an underpinning rationale for what we do, and supports scale through stakeholder engagement.** Specifically, the diverse work of Barnett (2011), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Jackson (2008), and Tomlinson (2017a) is viewed collectively, in this new research-informed approach being proposed.

Each of these five possibilities is presented in direct response to the issues raised in the findings of this research and, collectively, they also begin to address the second research aim of this thesis, which was to offer a practical solution that could support the development of a more effective future approach to employability.

Collectively, these assertions begin to embrace the complexity of the concept of employability, not reducing it to something over-simplistic and fixed, discrete and residing outside the day-to-day duties of academics (which is currently often the case with the reductionist view often demonstrated in the findings, which translates employability simply as employment and skills).

The next section of this chapter begins to explore which contextual areas of learning critically highlighted in the first of the possibilities identified might be included in seeking to expand the current approaches that are evident in practice, and which have been identified through the findings of this research. This also refines the proposition offered in direct response to the second research aim, and leads into the final section, which attempts to outline how the employability agenda might be repositioned in supporting more effective future approaches.

## **Learning for work or life? Establishing a new conceptual position**

Revisiting the first of the assertions made in the previous section, the notion of *contextualised learning* was highlighted by Fugate et al. (2004) when introducing the concept of *career identity*. However, the recommendation being made here, in response to the current narrow understanding of employability evidenced in this thesis, is that this concept might be extended to encompass other areas of contextual learning, broadening the current view observed amongst leaders, academics and student participants in this study, and ultimately contributing to the development of a more holistic taxonomy of learning, to be introduced and explained in detail for the first time in the following sections.

The challenge being addressed here is where understanding of the concept of employability has essentially been narrowed to a point, where it has a single focus on securing the first destination job, as commonly illustrated in the findings. By being exposed to only this surface-level view, students are being misinformed of the true breadth of learning that is required, not only for success in a working context, but in life as a whole.

This clearly has direct implications for how leaders and academics articulate employability and the actions they subsequently adopt to address it. To move from this standpoint means positioning the employability agenda differently. The suggestion here is for a shift in conceptual positioning of this agenda to one that centres on creating lifelong and lifewide learners, as opposed to simply learners for now, where obtaining a job is the only focus. Clearly, gaining employment needs to remain a consideration, but not as the sole driver, and a broader focus is the preference, based both on the literature review and in relation to the research findings reported here. This is supported by Cole and Hallett (2019) and several leaders and academics from the case studies, who recognised the ongoing and lifelong nature of learning for employability. In this way, *preparing for a complex world* by Jackson (2008) and Barnett (2011) becomes the primary focus for future pedagogical approaches, allowing the spotlight to shift to the qualities and dispositions necessary to support this approach, instead of being simply aimed at an employment-related context, which in the current and ever-changing work environment is simply too limiting.

The notion of specifying the contextual areas of learning which, when combined, contribute to a richer and more diverse learning environment, together with lifelong and lifewide learning as the supporting principles of pedagogical practice, this radically shifts the potential marketing and positioning of the employability agenda in the HE sector today and begins to tackle the key findings highlighted through this research, which will now be explained further.

Specifying desired areas of learning leads us to the work of *constructive alignment* (Biggs and Tang, 2011), the *flipped curriculum* (Scott, 2016a) and *assurances of learning* (Lawson, 2016). However, it extends and builds on this earlier work, seeking to guide the direction of learning in ways that begin to align with the relevant employability literature and, more specifically, the conceptual models of employability, thus addressing this gap highlighted by both the national survey and case study findings. Scott (2016b) also sought to align learning with his own model, but based on his own primary research, rather than factoring in the earlier body of work considered as part of this research.

Defining areas of learning as proposed here might encourage more discussion and reflection amongst leaders, employers, academics, programme teams collectively and students, developing a shared understanding of what is critically important for employability, moving beyond the more traditional view of skills, experience and Careers Education commonly cited by participants in the leaders, academic and student samples in this study.

However, the recommendation here is to not rigidly follow the constructive alignment approach, but to apply it more flexibly, not only focusing on developing specific learning outcomes, but also considering more fluid *learning objectives* as a direction of travel for learning in a particular area, such as working towards developing self-confidence or emotional intelligence. In this way, this work may be seen as an evolutionary and continuous journey, rather than aiming at a fixed point and final destination. The intention would be to bring a wider range of qualities and dispositions into the learning narrative, extending it beyond knowledge and skills. Instead of centring traditionally on what the learner can do, this new approach, would redirect the focus onto who they are as an individual and their identity more broadly, thus linking back to the psychological underpinning highlighted in Chapter 3 (Boyatzis and

Saatcioglu, 2008, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Gardner, 1999 and Goleman, 1996, 1998). This also brings in the value of the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) who talk about *possible self*, the notion of an individual having a malleable sense of who they are and what they might become.

In a similar fashion, Fugate et al. (2004) include *Career Identity* as one of the key elements of their own psycho-social model of employability. This elevates the traditional notion of careers education, bringing in a psychological dimension which is concerned with how people define themselves in a working environment. However, it is clearly important for the individual to consider their own wider personal identity first, understanding who they are more holistically before giving more specific consideration to fitting into a working context. In most cases, it could be argued that work does not define us; we define who we are at work.

From this perspective, employability as a concept - given that it is about more than simply gaining a job - should become more about how we define ourselves as individuals in a wider context. In this way, the discourse becomes one of integrated and contextual learning experiences, rather than the discrete and disconnected episodes of learning that could be argued resemble current practice and have been commonly articulated in the findings of this research. The work of Tomlinson (2017a) begins to move in this direction, but perhaps does not go far enough to highlight the potential benefits of engaging in these areas of learning beyond a working context. However, his *Graduate Capital model* does, at least, attempt to drag the narrative from being focused only on skills, to one that also centres on the individual, who they are, their connections in life and their ability to leverage and connect the capitals the individual has defined for their own advantage.

The model from Fugate et al. (2004) also has potential value here. It is presented as a model of employability that centres around employment-related outcomes, including *career identity* as one of the three key areas of focus. The other two areas defined are *personal adaptability* and *human and social capital*, which clearly resonate with the later work of Higdon (2016) and Tomlinson (2017a) and which begin to broaden the focus for learning having much wider application and potential benefits. This terminology incorporates strong psychological underpinnings, creating a much more holistic view of employability and including areas that are clearly of relevance not only

in the workplace, but also more broadly in life. This work goes part of the way towards defining critical areas of learning as part of a more holistic approach.

In 2018/19, I independently continued work in a similar vein to that of Tomlinson (2017a) and Fugate et al. (2004), developing the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy which was first introduced in Cole and Hallett (2019). As stated in Chapter 3, whilst *Dimensions for Learning* as a figure has only recently been published, the theoretical underpinning behind it explored in this chapter, and the detailed content and purpose of this framework has not previously been published. This thesis seeks to build and extend on the initial introduction of the figure and taxonomy, making a unique contribution to the body of knowledge.

This work is also underpinned by the employability research considered as part of this study, including the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007). This more recent work also aligns with my earlier work, featuring in Cole and Tibby (2013) with the *Framework for Embedding Employability*. This process-focused framework and guide was also based on employability research and was designed as a tool to enable the development of an institution-wide strategic approach to employability.

The motivation behind the creation of *Dimensions for Learning* directly emerged from the findings of this thesis, seeking to address the key challenges that have been identified. Firstly, it was intended to influence the current narrow understandings and interpretations of employability as being employment and skills focused, by deliberately shifting the narrative away from both *employment* and *employability*, achieving this by essentially reframing the concept as being primarily concerned with learning, but across more diverse areas, for the specific purpose of developing a wider range of personal qualities and dispositions.

Secondly, the taxonomy was designed to connect work to support employability in a more integrated way, by positioning it as part of a broader approach to learning and teaching, where the language utilised is learning-focused instead of being employment and skills-focused. In this way, the taxonomy seeks to address the disconnect that was evident in the findings between work associated with supporting employability and the core learning and teaching activities within the institution and curriculum.



Thirdly, as has already been highlighted, the taxonomy directly relates to the lack of use of employability research as a key influence on the thinking and understanding of employability as a concept, amongst both leaders and academics in the sample.

The repositioning exercise undertaken in response to these findings has resulted in the development of the new taxonomy, which is now presented here in response to the second research aim: to develop a model / framework to support more effective future approaches to employability. Aiding better understanding of the concept of employability is at the heart of these recommendations:

Notions of employability that recognise the kind of people we are and develop into, rather than merely reflecting an industry-enforced agenda of what we should know, or what we can do are preferable here. We can stretch the employability debate across a more varied and fertile terrain and into a progressive, shared language that students and academics might just be interested in.

Cole and Hallett (2019:121)

Further supporting the need to reposition the current rhetoric, Tomlinson (2017a: 348) states:

There is, however, a need to think more broadly and conceptually about graduate employability and introduce new vocabularies that connect with its relational complexities and also graduates' lived experiences through and beyond HE.

He goes on to state:

... while notions of graduate 'skills', 'competencies' and 'attributes' are used inter-changeably, they often convey different things to different people and definitions are not always likely to be shared among employers, university teachers and graduates themselves (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Barrie, 2006).

(cited in Tomlinson, 2017a: 412)

This highlights the confusion that currently exists and the inconsistencies that were evident with participants from the case studies and the national survey. Moving on to highlight the potential multi-dimensional value of his model, Tomlinson (2017a:339) equates the capitals he defines as:

....key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates. These resources encompass a range of educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions and are acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences.

This demonstrates, at a conceptual level at least, the potential to engage in a discourse that highlights the wider benefits of learning beyond the workplace and, in addition, gained from across a range of spaces in an individual's life, aligning with the work of Barnett (2011) and Jackson (2008) on lifewide learning.

While the student participants in the case studies verified the value they attached to learning beyond the curriculum, the lens adopted was very much focused on learning that would benefit them in terms of gaining a job in the future, rather than having potentially greater value beyond the workplace too.

Influencing the discourse employed by institutions, their leaders and academics is the starting point in seeking to influence how students, in turn, understand and interpret employability and subsequently engage in activities intended to support their future development.

### **A taxonomy to support future approaches**

As stated, this thesis seeks to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge by addressing the key issues raised in the findings of this research, and in addition to other issues already cited as challenges within the published literature. These include:

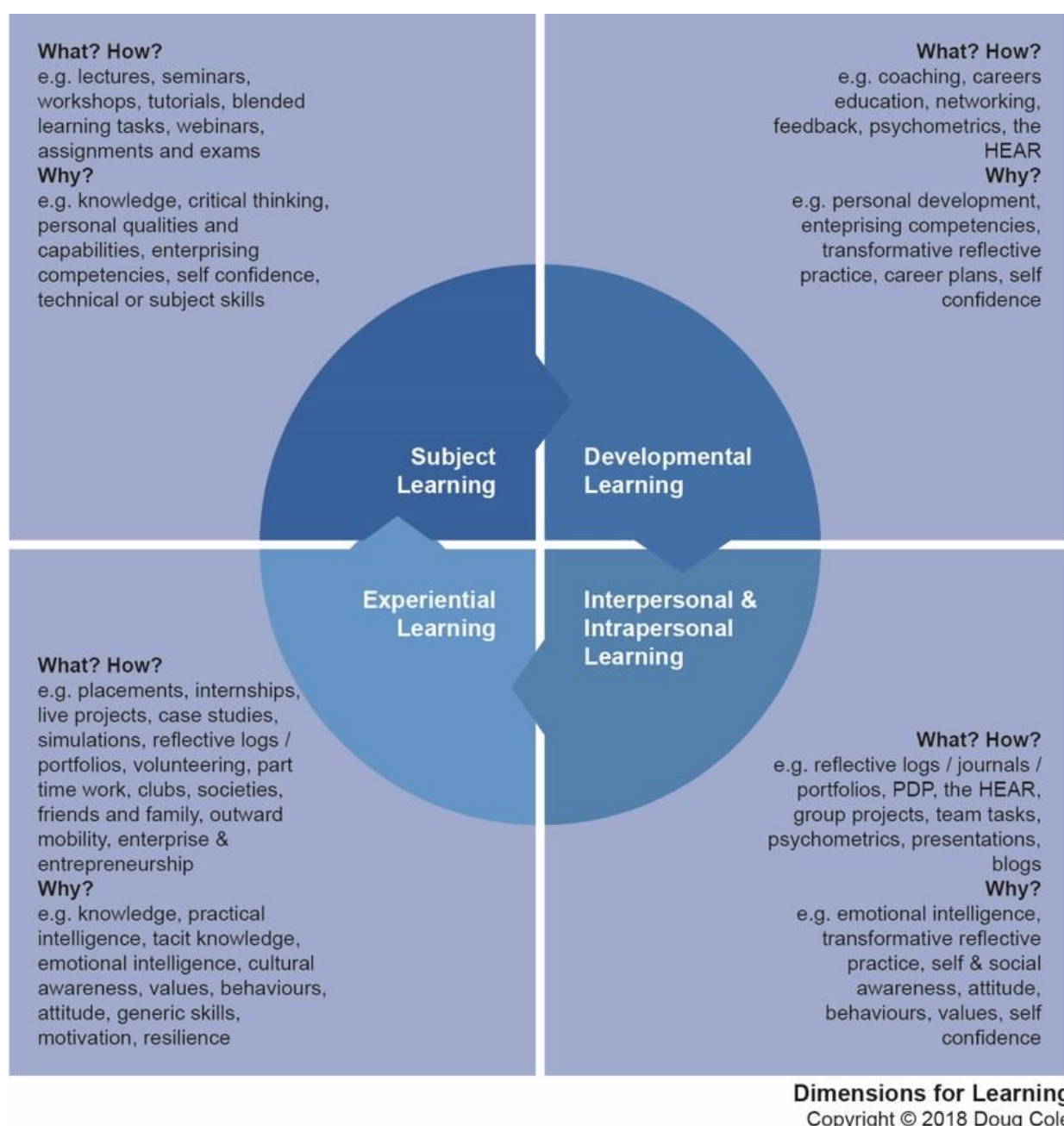
1. An inconsistency and narrowness in the understanding and resulting discourse by stakeholders, which subsequently influences the opportunities made available in practice (Hallett 2012, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a)

2. A scenario where learning experiences are disconnected: seen as discrete areas, where learning for employment is the primary focus, and viewed as residing outside the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2017a).
3. Lack of engagement with the conceptual models of employability as underpinning research (identified directly through this study).
4. Lack of engagement from all stakeholders (Cole and Hallett, 2019, Higdon, 2016).
5. Lack of a consistent and strategic approach to employability (Artess et al. 2017).

Each of these issues, as has been outlined, relates to the findings from this research. In response, the assertion here is that there is an urgent need to reposition the employability agenda and that this involves evolution to a discourse and approach that is centred around learning and teaching and which builds on the previous conceptual models of employability: reframing the narrative and redefining the areas of focus while still retaining the underpinning intent and purpose behind those features (Biggs and Tang, 2011, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a). This thinking is what led to the creation of the Dimensions for Learning taxonomy.

*Dimensions for Learning*, Cole (2019), cited in Cole and Hallett (2019:128), has not previously been explained in detail and is introduced below. This taxonomy, which seeks to classify the associated terminology and principles underpinning employability, is essentially a research-informed, strategic and tactical tool for addressing both curriculum design and extra-curricular provision, designed to support a more effective future approach to employability that is learning-centred, principle-based and fluid, rather than being prescriptive and content-driven.

**Figure 9: Dimensions for Learning, Cole (2019), first cited in Cole and Hallett (2019)**



As highlighted, this taxonomy has been designed to engage all stakeholders and, therefore deliberately avoids use of the word *employability*. This thinking aligns with the earlier work of Tomlinson (2017a:339) who, in developing his own model, stated:

..... this paper offers a more integrated approach; it also shows that whilst each of these components relate to different properties, they overlap to some degree and their boundaries are fairly fluid. More significantly, this paper offers an

alternative vocabulary to understanding graduate employability, its development in HE and in graduates' transition to the labour market.

*Dimensions for Learning* also has clear areas of overlap between each of the four quadrants presented, and as described by Tomlinson (2017a), they are intended to be represented in a more fluid relationship, rather than being four distinct and separate areas of focus. It would also be argued that this taxonomy presents an *alternative vocabulary* intended for the purpose of highlighting to all stakeholders not only what is important for employability from an employment perspective, but also factors that underpin success in life more broadly. This proposed taxonomy might also underpin several other strategic priorities that exist in HE, including the wider student experience, retention and attainment and the wellbeing agenda. By focusing on learning more holistically, the student is placed at the heart of this work, rather than it being marginalised as concerned with only securing a first destination job. Simultaneously, greater efficiencies and gains across multiple strategic areas of work may be achieved.

Fundamentally and most importantly, *Dimensions for Learning* helps consider the balance of learning opportunities that are made available for the individual student, and addresses the realities identified by the student sample in the case studies, where a narrow view was held on the importance of simply gaining experience first and foremost. This new taxonomy looks across both the formal education environment and into other learning spaces in life beyond the curriculum, Barnett (2011) and Jackson (2008). This more holistic view and approach may in turn begin to address the concerns voiced by academics in the findings who did not feel a sense of responsibility for employability, and who ultimately questioned its place in HE and their curriculums. This taxonomy also creates opportunities for more diverse discussions around learning in its broadest sense, considering the variety and specific combination of contextual learning experiences that a student should be able to access across their entire education journey.

This taxonomy seeks to extend on the *Graduate Capital model* by Tomlinson (2017a) by attempting to deliberately distance the purpose of engaging with this learning primarily for employment reasons. In addition, it aims to add further clarity, to aid understanding and, as a result, better support engagement with the content. By using

four simple headings for each of the quadrants and highlighting them as four dimensions that are equally important for learning in its broadest sense, this is a relatively simple concept to engage with, initially at least. This is crucial if there is to be any chance of future deeper engagement. Given that the findings from the academic sample demonstrated a distinct lack of engagement with the conceptual models of employability, any factors that might negatively impact on potential future engagement have been considered from the outset.

Reflecting on the issue of engagement further, the challenge with the work of Tomlinson (2017a) is that the terminology may not resonate with many, who will not have a clear understanding of what is involved, and as a result may not engage with the model, despite the inherent value that it may have. When using terms such as *social capital*, *cultural capital* and *identity capital* these are unlikely to be well known and widely understood and will therefore require further reading to establish a level of understanding. While this may not be considered a serious issue, pragmatically it is a critical consideration, particularly when seeking to engage at scale and especially with academics who are often busy individuals with multiple competing priorities and limited time to invest in an area which they may or may not consider as important. As the findings of this thesis have demonstrated, there was little consensus in a shared understanding or the discourse around employability at the leader, academic and student level, therefore seeking to achieve some sense of clarity needs to be a shared priority.

Very few, however, could argue that HE is not about learning, and thus this taxonomy presents a structure which might position and act as a framework for more strategic discussions and subsequent approaches to work designed to support future student success, by providing a means of achieving some level of consistency or parity between how leaders, academics and individual courses and programmes contribute beyond the more traditional and narrow focus on subject learning, experience and skills.

In this way at a strategic level, *Dimensions for Learning* provides a structure which acts as a means for developing a broader and more comprehensive discourse around learning, creating the opportunity for a more consistent approach in practice. By embedding this to act as a framework and being guided by each of the dimensions

outlined at the programme level, stakeholders can then define the desired and specific learning outcomes or objectives in each area, before then developing or signposting to the required learning and teaching activities and opportunities to support these explicit learning outcomes and objectives (Biggs and Tang, 2011). This combined process would be embedded in the existing university curriculum, and programme design processes and procedures. Working closely with the Academic Registry function, this taxonomy may just help achieve the scale necessary to enable a truly institution-wide, consistent (yet still flexible) and more comprehensive approach to learning to be delivered, features that were highlighted in the national survey as being lacking at times.

At a tactical level, the taxonomy might also serve as a reflective tool for academics during the curriculum design process. Supporting academics and stakeholders who would use it to ascertain the areas already being addressed at programme level, and where there may be gaps. Where academics previously expressed a lack of understanding around the term *employability*, having a point of reference as a starting point for their planning and curriculum design activity is certainly considered to be a positive benefit. Yet this proposed methodology still provides the flexibility for academics to lead and shape this definition process in the context of their own subject and discipline which, from an engagement perspective, is critical.

From a student perspective, the taxonomy also presents a structure and reference point for reflection on their learning, and how their learning experiences and outcomes might combine to support their future aspirations. Where students in the findings failed to recognise how their employability was being addressed both by the curriculum and beyond, this taxonomy may help illuminate the breadth of experiences they are already engaging with, and the value of these experiences to their future development.

From an employer perspective, this taxonomy promotes the qualities and areas of learning relevant to them, as highlighted across numerous previous studies. Over twenty years ago, Harvey et al (1997) stressed that employers need flexible and adaptable employees, who are able to cope with a complex, uncertain and ever-changing world. These sentiments were later supported by the work of Jackson (2008) and with the current pandemic it would be strongly argued that this all still very much applies to this day.

Designing a taxonomy that could be of value to a range of stakeholders strengthens the case for it being a valuable contribution in seeking to identify more effective future approaches to employability, and in direct response to the second research aim of this thesis.

The first column in Table 6 summarises the key themes identified through this research, from both the literature review and the results. In the middle column examples are cited from either the literature review or from participants across the samples within the study, illuminating these individual themes and ultimately the intention and rationale behind each of the dimensions that are included in the taxonomy. This rationale is then outlined in the final column. Overall, Table 6 demonstrates the direct relationship between how the individual themes identified through this research and this thesis directly relate to the development of the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy.

*Table 6: A summary linking key themes and findings and the development of Dimensions for Learning*

Theme	Quote / Evidence	Dimensions for Learning taxonomy
1. An inconsistency and narrowness in the understanding and resulting discourse by stakeholders which subsequently influences the opportunities made available in practice	<p>Page 202 of this thesis:  <i>So, we don't really talk a lot about it as a team but we are quite proactive in trying to provide our students, particularly our level six students to be fair, but level five and level four as well, with opportunities to really try and upskill on a range of skills.</i>            Academic, University B, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 177 of this thesis:  <i>...there'll be meetings that you'll be developing definitions and understandings around, there'll be conferences, there will be internal meetings and discussions where you're sense making collectively, really, about our interpretations of what it means.</i>            University A, case study (2016)</p> <p>Page 182 of this thesis:  <i>Employability is about preparing students for work after academia by ensuring that they have acquired the necessary skills required in their vocations, and that these skills are transferable.</i>            Academic, University A, national survey 2015</p>	<p>The evidence supports the broadening of the discourse in order to then impact on opportunities made in practice.</p> <p>Directly informed by the literature review, by including the four dimensions of 1. Subject learning 2. Experiential learning 3. Developmental learning and 4. Interpersonal and Interpersonal learning, this is intended to collectively tackle the issue created by these narrow interpretations.</p>



	<p>Page 191 of this thesis:  <i>It's this buzzword. For example, us on the open days will bang out employability because it's a buzzword that people like to hear. But do they really understand what it is?... I think they understand this in terms of trying to upskill, make yourself more likely to get a job.</i>  Academic, University B, case study 2016</p>	<p>Collectively these four dimensions present a point of reference for a range of opportunities to subsequently be made available in practice.</p>
<p>2. A scenario where learning experiences are disconnected, seen as discrete areas, where learning for employment is the primary focus and is viewed as residing outside the curriculum.</p>	<p>Page 164 of this thesis:  <i>All undergraduate courses must have a career planning agreement which maps transferable skills acquired throughout the course. Other than that university has a laissez faire approach i.e. just let the careers service get on with it.</i>  Academic, national survey 2015  &amp;  <i>Employability is embedded into all modules, there is a heavy emphasis on providing employability skills and ensuring the students can access job opportunities.</i>  Academic, national survey 2015</p> <p>Page 179 of this thesis:  <i>For me, I think employability is an important facet of what we're trying to achieve here. But there's more to a degree than that, I would hope.... employability is one important component, but I would hope that a degree is much more than that. For some people, it's not about employability, is it? It's about personal aspiration of achieving something.</i>  Leader, University B, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 180 of this thesis:  <i>...I think there's the tension from the teaching staff, that tension between teaching their subject that is their passion and relating it to employability or seeing employability as integrated to it when they might see that as being somebody else's job.</i>  Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 182 of this thesis:  <i>Higher Educations' role is to deliver 'fit for purpose' graduates into industry.</i>  Academic, national survey 2015</p>	<p>Collectively this evidence informed the taxonomy development, with the use of language directly related to learning. Each dimension is defined as a specific area of learning and the word <i>employability</i> deliberately does not appear in the taxonomy.</p> <p>This is intended to broaden the lens through which the agenda is viewed, to being beyond employment-focused alone. With a much richer scope, this increases the chances of identifying other supporting aspects of learning that are already likely to be contained within the curriculum.</p>
<p>3. Lack of engagement with the conceptual models of employability as underpinning research</p>	<p>Page 104 of this thesis:  Minten (2010:72) states:  <i>The graduates' performance tended to be attributed to their personality and a clear pattern of strengths emerged across them: good interpersonal skill, initiative, a positive attitude, ability to work hard, commitment and having past relevant experiences.</i></p>	<p>Collectively, the models and their constituent features that have been considered in more depth in the literature review, have directly informed the design</p>

<p>(identified directly through this study)</p>	<p>Page 178 of this thesis:  <i>Holmes (2001:112) argues, “despite the considerable body of literature resistant to this approach (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000), it continues to be promoted in policy, at national and institutional level”.</i>            Cole and Hallett (2019:121)</p> <p>Page 182 of this thesis:  <i>So, employability is the skills that they need to develop to move into graduate level employment.</i>            Senior leader, University A, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 185 of this thesis:  <i>Obviously as you know I came from a non-HE background. So, I had a view about how you develop young people, fourteen to nineteen-year olds particularly but I’d also worked with adults in lifelong learning as well. So, it’s that perspective of how you engage people with developing their skills and then being able to articulate their skills and hopefully be able to gain employment from that.</i>            Senior leader, University A, case study 2016</p>	<p>and inclusion of each of the four dimensions in the taxonomy, presented as a result of this study:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subject learning            Aligns with work by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004), Kumar (2007) and Tomlinson (2017)</li> <li>2. Experiential learning            Aligns with work by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Knight and Yorke (2004) and Tomlinson (2017).             In addition to the work of Heyler and Lee (2014)</li> <li>3. Developmental learning            Aligns with work by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004), Kumar (2007) and Tomlinson (2017)             In addition to the work of Bridgstock (2009) and Stanbury (2005)</li> <li>4. Interpersonal and Interpersonal learning            Aligns with work by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004), Kumar (2007) and Tomlinson (2017)             In addition to the work of Cole and</li> </ol>
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		Hallett (2019), Holmes (2001) and Minten (2010)
4. Lack of engagement from all stakeholders	<p>Page 180 of this thesis:  <i>I think for some academics it's actually the concept of it. I think there's two sides to it. I think some academics do, I think, feel that they're here to do the academic bit and therefore they're not interested in that wider discussion about where it's going to lead.</i>  Leader, University A, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 192 of this thesis:  <i>I think employability for me is its readiness to hit the ground running when they [students] finish university in their job... and they are ready to go in any particular job. So, it's more on the job skills and training which is why I'm cynical because I don't see that as the university's job.</i>  Academic, University B, case study 2016</p> <p>Page 197 of this thesis:  <i>I won't define employability, even really talk about it that much. I'm focusing on sports psychology...on the students' need to be safe and effective to practice from a professional practice perspective.</i>  Academic, University A, case study 2016</p>	<p>The narrative of learning was adopted within the taxonomy in a deliberate attempt to reposition the employability agenda as a means of addressing these existing tensions.</p> <p>By defining four broader and more holistic areas of learning in the taxonomy, this stretches the discourse beyond being one of simply <i>job and skills</i>.</p>
5. Lack of a consistent and strategic approach to employability	<p>Page 127 of this thesis:  <i>To date there has been limited research conducted on a national scale, in relation to employability, with the majority of work focusing on individual departments or subject areas within single institutions</i> (Artess et al, 2017).</p> <p>Page 181 of this thesis:  <i>People are being rather allowed to do their own little thing in whatever domain they choose to operate and fairly often its lone operators. And to not operate within a wider community or organisation which itself may gain some added value through the fact that it operates as a bigger organisation. So that rather siloed and amateur and local approach...</i>  Senior Leader, University A, case study 2016</p>	<p>This is an example of evidence that informs the development of the taxonomy as a whole, as a point of reference to help achieve consistency at scale, while still allowing flexibility in terms of how it may then be embedded in context at the subject or programme level.</p> <p>The taxonomy is a principle-based approach, as opposed to being presented as a one-size-fits-all, restrictive, content-focused approach. The latter would be likely to encounter challenge in relation</p>

		to gaining traction at scale in practice.
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Each dimension within the taxonomy will now be explored further, referencing the supporting literature that has been considered in parallel to the specific findings of this research. It is the combination of these areas that has led to the development of Dimensions for Learning, and most notably in response to the clear lack of engagement with underpinning literature in the previous and current approaches to employability reported, at both strategic and practice level and as observed throughout this research.

### *Subject learning*

*Understanding* features as the first of the four components in the USEM model of employability by Knight and Yorke (2004), *Degree Subject Knowledge* also features as an element in the Career Edge Model of employability by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007). Fugate et al. (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a) include *Human Capital* as a feature of their own models of employability, where human capital includes education and accumulation of relevant knowledge. With this commonality across four significant conceptual models of employability, and with knowledge at the heart of education at all levels, its inclusion here in *Dimensions for Learning* is a necessity, especially as engagement with the academic community has been established as critical throughout the findings, and as many student participants failed to recognise the value of the curriculum itself in supporting their future employability. This highlights the value of subject learning here as having merits across multiple fronts.

### *Developmental learning*

The development of students - their individual starting points, their desired destinations and the direction these entail - sits at the very heart of the entire educational journey. Personal Development Planning sought to capture this process, the *Higher Education Achievement Report* (HEAR) continued with this focus and most recently, the government's focus with HEFCE, now OfS, funding a variety of *Learning Gain* projects nationally, demonstrates that interest in this space continues to this day.

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) highlight the importance of *Career Development Learning* in their graduate model of employability, Fugate et al. (2004) include *Career Identity* as a key feature of their Psycho-Social model of employability and Bridgstock (2009) recognises the value of *career management skills*. With every institution investing in their own Careers Service, along with work which also includes a focus on enterprise and entrepreneurship, student progression beyond university is clearly a shared aspiration. This is certainly one area that participants in this study often recognised as often being present, but not all were necessarily currently engaging as effectively as they might be, for a variety of reasons. From this perspective, the inclusion of *developmental learning* in the taxonomy is warranted.

*Developmental learning* certainly merges into other dimensions; however, its specific inclusion is also justified by the need to consider the forward trajectory of students, with that concept of *possible self*, Markus and Nurius (1986), requiring students themselves to consider their journey and what activities will best support and guide their exploration.

By adding an explicit focus on what has been termed *developmental learning*, the intention was to ensure that this future-facing and lifelong approach was included. This could be suggested to play a similar role to *personal adaptability*, which is cited as critical for employability by Fugate et al. (2004) in their model. This adds a fluidity to discussions, which has been previously highlighted as an important consideration, rather than the notion of a fixed set of attributes or skills: the words *development* and *adaptability* both suggest ongoing change and some form of advancement, rather than the notion of seeking to capture something that may be more static. By including this dimension within the taxonomy adds a dynamic, lifelong and lifewide underpinning strand of work, that elevates the combination of learning to the next level.

### *Interpersonal and intrapersonal learning*

This is perhaps the most significant of the four dimensions because of its clear absence from the discourse amongst most participants in this research, and its implicit or ambiguous presence with others. While some may certainly argue its existence in their provision (for example in nursing, teaching and social work), few could argue that this is always detailed and clear enough to students and learners. The discourse around this area of learning is currently notably missing from much of the employability-related lexicon, and this was further demonstrated through the findings of the research undertaken relating to undergraduate sports programmes. Yet the value of interpersonal and intrapersonal learning has been highlighted by numerous authors, including Minten (2010) and Yorke (2006), who stress the importance of interpersonal skills. This is further supported by Rozell et al. (2002:272) who stated:

...other types of intelligence such as interpersonal (one's adeptness at handling interpersonal relationships) and intrapersonal skills (the ability to manage one's own emotions) are equally, if not more important, in predicting success in the academic area and the workplace (Goleman, 1995, 1998: Sternberg, 1996)

Research publications by Bray et al. (1974), Boyatzis (1982), Howard and Bray (1988), Kotter (1982), Luthans et. al. (1988) and Thornton and Byham (1982) (cited in Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008:93), all also state the importance of both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

Over ten years later, and despite advancements in technology and artificial intelligence, these sentiments still remain relevant to this day, evidenced by fact that the Chartered Institute for Personal Development (CIPD), the UK professional body for human resources and workforce development, has been running a campaign for several years called *The Future of Work is Human*, recognising the importance of developing those personal qualities and dispositions that a machine is unlikely to ever be capable of fully replicating.

For the reasons cited here and the overall the lack of evidence of existence as a focus for learning from participants in the national survey and case studies, *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal learning* urgently need addressing.

## *Experiential learning*

Finally, the importance of *experiential learning* is highlighted as the fourth *Dimension for Learning*. Once again, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a), all highlight the importance of gaining experience in a variety of contexts, both in work and life more broadly. This is sometimes referred to as *social capital*, ensuring that students gain experiences beyond the formal learning environment.

*Work-related learning* refers to the variety of methods through which students are brought into contact with employers, not only through placements but through activities such as live projects and simulations, Heyler and Lee (2014). Neil and Mullholland (2003) and Oliver (2015) all support the value of work-related learning to employability and Jackson and Collings (2018) highlight the value of applying learning in practice. In relation to the findings of this research, this is the one area that was already commonly recognised by participants as having value in relation to employability. Adopting a more strategic stance, Magnell and Kolmos (2017) also state that academics may add value to their curriculum through engaging with employers.

These are examples of the types of work where the value of engaging with learning in and beyond the curriculum has been recognised. For these reasons, experiential learning in its broadest form has been presented as the final dimension.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, the original research aims have been addressed. The key findings from the research have been highlighted and explored, with specific consideration given to how they align with the supporting literature, and the national context and environment.

Finally, a unique contribution to the body of knowledge around employability is offered through the presentation and explanation of *Dimensions for Learning*, a new taxonomy resulting from the findings of this research and the underpinning employability-related literature. This taxonomy has been specifically designed to address the challenges raised that currently hamper the employability agenda across sport and a variety of subject areas at a national and global level.

The final chapter of this thesis draws together all its elements, presents several recommendations for future opportunities for research around the concept of employability, and concludes with a final summary.



# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

### Introduction

This final chapter concludes the study, making specific reference to the original purpose of the research, the research aims and the key findings. Commonalities in the findings are raised and their significance is asserted through the supporting literature that underpins their value.

Moving this research to its logical conclusion and emerging as a direct result of the key findings, a new taxonomy for learning was offered in the previous chapter. This taxonomy critically aligns with the conceptual models of employability in the literature. In this respect, the taxonomy seeks to help challenge the current narrow understanding of *employability* commonly demonstrated by leaders, academics and students, where it is perceived to be primarily concerned with skills development for the sole purpose of securing employment.

Largely due to this common understanding, the employability agenda is viewed within the samples as being disconnected from other core activities within the institution, namely learning and teaching. Instead, activities considered to support employability, are seen as discrete, typically residing beyond the curriculum. The taxonomy presented serves as a tool to break down the barriers causing this disconnect. It reframes employability as primarily being concerned with a holistic and integrated approach to learning, therefore reinforcing the value of the curriculum alongside other lifewide learning opportunities (Barnett, 2011 and Jackson, 2008).

Where understanding of employability was reported in the findings as developed in isolation from the supporting employability literature, it was informed by other sources such as colleagues, the media and through the influence of the metrics. Crucially, the taxonomy presented aligns with this body of literature, and especially the work of Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004) and Tomlinson (2017a) described in Chapter 3. However, the aspiration here was to essentially reposition this work to positively influence stakeholders' current preconceived understanding of employability

and their subsequent engagement. This would potentially be achieved through the fundamental anchoring of this work in a more integrated and holistic institutional approach to learning and teaching.

Finally, recommendations are made in this chapter for future further research that may help to add value and clarity to a complex area of work that is often currently understood only at surface level and in a restricted and narrow way.

## **Background and context**

Seeking to explore current understanding and interpretations of employability in undergraduate sports programmes in the UK was at the heart of this research. At the time of embarking on this thesis, this was particularly pertinent, due to the lead-up to the 2012 Olympic Games in London and government's explicit ambition articulated at the time to achieve a lasting legacy from hosting this event. This legacy was to include the positive impact on increasing participation in sport and physical activity in the community. With HE offering a plethora of undergraduate sports degree programmes, institutions certainly had a crucial role to play in supporting these national ambitions.

These positive aspirations were put into perspective by the following authors around this time, where concerns were raised on the quality of graduates emerging from HE. For example, Minten (2010) cited several sources in drawing the conclusion that HE was failing to develop graduates who met the needs of employers in the sports industry. These views were also echoed by Pitchford cited in Collins (2010), who wrote about the decline in standards in the sports development sector.

Thus, better understanding how HE was engaging with the employability agenda, in a bid to develop quality graduates capable of helping fulfil these national ambitions in the world of sport, was particularly relevant. These factors were ultimately distilled in to two research aims for this study, first stated in Chapter 1:

1. How is employability understood at a strategic and practice level and how does this relate to the employability literature?
2. To produce a *framework / model* which could support addressing employability more effectively in the future.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated that while employability remains a significant area of focus for government, employers and institutions, it is far from well understood, in relation to the conceptual models published in the literature, by the leaders, academics and students that were part of this study. As a result, strategy and practice designed to address employability often centred around skills development, with the short-term goal of gaining initial employment upon graduation. This illustrates the common interchangeable use of the terms *employment* and *employability* and the failure to recognise the relationship between them and - more importantly - the differences (Bridgstock, 2009, Cole and Hallett, 2019, Higdon, 2016, Holmes, 2001 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

In both Chapters 5 and 6 there are examples of leaders, academics and students who demonstrated a more nuanced and complex view of employability. However, in the absence of a uniting force, these remained disparate and disconnected voices amongst the more dominant skills and employment-focused understanding and discourse, where activities to support employability were viewed by many participants, particularly the student groups, as separate from core learning and teaching activities provided through the formal curriculum.

The level of understanding demonstrated across the samples shows that consistency in any approach to employability will remain a challenge, and therefore requires urgent attention. With the ever-present pressures on HE to respond to the employment focused-metrics, how employability is understood and subsequently approached, remains a critical consideration for both institutions and individual subject areas. Engaging leaders, academics and students in this task will not be straightforward, due to often long-held views being reinforced on a daily basis through government and media discourse that highlights the *skills gap* and the need for HE to respond. Perceived success in this task is measured primarily by an employment-related metric, which features prominently within the TEF (The Department for Education, 2017).

The findings stated above were established as follows. Phase one of this study was based on a national survey, deployed in a bid to establish current understanding of employability amongst the academic community, across the wider sector and with those who were teaching undergraduate sports students.

Phase two then allowed for particular patterns and trends emerging from phase one to be explored in more depth through two institutional case studies, selected from the sample involved in the national survey. The methodology here included semi-structured interviews and focus groups, enabling exploration of topics raised through the national survey with selected leaders, academics and students from each institution. In this way, the findings of the national survey directly influenced the design of the case studies. Some limited strategic-level documentation was also explored in this second phase of the research. Ultimately, the ability to conduct this second phase of the research effectively was largely dependent on access-related considerations.

The findings from this predominantly qualitative research were manually coded to establish a combined view across the samples, enabling further comparisons and reflection on particular patterns and trends. In phase one of the research, the Career Edge model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) was used as an organising framework for this coding, allowing a view to be established of how closely academics' understanding mapped to one of the more prominent conceptual models of employability published in the literature. This consideration was a specific feature of the first research aim of this thesis, to compare current understanding to the employability literature.

In phase two of the research, the findings from the focus groups, interviews and document review were also coded manually. This time, however, a more open organising structure was adopted, without a pre-conceived coding system determined in advance. In reality, however, most of the responses from participants in the case studies fell broadly into the same Career Edge categories adopted in phase one. This demonstrated the potentially narrow nature of current understanding of employability across the groups of participants in this study and the value of using conceptual models to reflect on our current interpretations of this critical area of work.

Expanding on this notion of understanding and adopting a more holistic view of the challenges in this area of work, Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011:3), highlighted how government had adopted a particular lens through which to interpret the wider national challenge of economic growth and supporting workforce development:

The official, government approach to graduate employability has been skills-led, from Dearing (1997) to Leitch (2006) to the Department of Education (2017), despite the fact that this has been increasingly called into question. For example, a significant piece of research by Mason et al. (2003), summarised by Cranmer (2006), again called into question the efficacy of skills provision in higher education.

This discourse has not shifted in the nine years since it was published and clearly *skills* continues to dominate the government and media understanding and associated lexicon to this day. Commonly, this was mirrored in the understanding and interpretation of employability by leaders, academics and students that were participants in this study. In this way, a direct relationship may be suggested to exist here.

Evidence of this narrow focus continuing to exist to this day was observed in the government-commissioned, Taylor report (2017:87), which suggested the need for a *national employability skills framework*. The call to address consistency is recognised as very much needed, as the findings of this thesis show. However, the recommendation to develop a skills framework in response to the issue of consistency in employability is problematic, and supporting this assertion Cole and Hallett (2019: 126) state:

The expectations around this proposed new framework are disingenuously neat: it suggests “educators can match their courses to the framework, employers can match their job vacancies to the skills they require and individuals are more easily able to have greater direction in planning their career” (Taylor, 2017, p. 86). With the UK government now considering these recommendations, the language we use to build our employability frameworks matters even more.

The findings of this thesis support these assertions, that action to address the national, government and industry-led understanding and resulting discourse of *employability*, as interpreted in terms of skills and first destination *job* is urgently required (Bridgstock, 2009, Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Higdon, 2016, Holmes, 2001 and Tomlinson, 2017a). Leaders’, academics’ and students’ understanding of

employability have been established as being most commonly influenced by factors other than the related research, yet in this study, experience, national employment metrics and significant others were commonly cited as key influences by participants. This provides further evidence of the disconnect existing between the research and actual strategy and practice in relation to employability.

In response to the national agenda championed by government, the media and industry, it might be suggested that *employability* has developed its own identity and inadvertently, perhaps, this has resulted in a divide and a further disconnect occurring between this agenda and the core activities that are constants in all HEIs: learning, teaching and research.

Ultimately driven by the perceived need to prepare students more effectively for life after their studies, more from an employment perspective, the current approaches articulated by those working across the sector could be critiqued for often appearing to be too narrow and limiting, particularly when we know a job is no longer for life (Hawkins, 1999). Could this preparation for life after university perhaps be approached in practice somewhat differently? Those targeted actions could be integrated into core activities that institutions and most staff are already engaging with, rather than the approach to employability continuing to be delivered as an explicit and disconnected conceptual area of work with its own distinct identity. The disconnect was certainly evident in the findings, with academics, leaders and students commonly viewing employability as being a distinct area of work, something that was often perceived as the responsibility of the Careers and Employability Service and not necessarily a core and integrated part of everything that happens through the formal curriculum or more widely across an HEI. In most cases, this scenario was not helped by the fact that employability was not defined directly with the students themselves, as reported by both academics and students within this study. The *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy was therefore developed to address these specific findings and the associated challenges outlined.

First highlighted in the literature review, it is at this point in the thesis that the recent work of Scott (2016b) is worth revisiting, as he also originally sought to evolve the narrative, from being just about skills to one that included other factors supporting employability that he had identified through his research with employers and

participants in higher education in Australia. He then looked to translate these areas identified directly into curriculum and assessment design, Scott (2016b:2):

...to assure the achievement standards and the quality of assessment in the contemporary university, we must start, therefore, by first confirming the quality (relevance and desirability) of *what* is being assessed. This requires us to confirm the fitness of purpose of assessment before looking at *how* well we are assessing (before looking, for example, at the fitness-for-purpose of assessment tasks, the effectiveness with which program level outcomes have been mapped to units, at the quality of the grading and calibration, at assuring the overall integrity of the process, minimising plagiarism, using assessment for learning not just of learning, and so on).

I would argue that this misses a critical stage, and that the rationale underpinning Scott's conceptualisation of what is desired in terms of areas to be assessed differs from those presented by the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy. With employability as a critical, overarching concept to the work of Scott (2016b) and this thesis, the work of Scott appears to fail to take into consideration a range of employability literature, where this elusive concept has already previously been defined, also based on supporting primary and secondary research and similarly developed through engagement with employers and other key literature. There is, however, no reference in the work of Scott (2016b) to any of the employability models included in Chapter 3, for example, namely Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007), Fugate et al. (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004), Kumar (2007) and Tomlinson (2017a). This is despite much of this work having been available for over a decade.

Critically, Scott (2016:6) also asserts that both the research and sector lacks "a shared, proven, validated and comprehensive professional and graduate capability framework..." making clear the need for a structure that may be adopted by a range of stakeholders, to ensure the right capabilities and competencies are made explicit, with potential to ultimately embed these areas of learning into the curriculum. This assertion could be disputed, as whilst Scott's study is located in Australia, it may have been valuable for him to explore current practice in the UK more widely. While not 'validated', the *Embedding Employability in the Curriculum Framework* and supporting guide by Cole and Tibby (2013) has previously responded to several of these later

claims by Scott, including acting as a tool to bring stakeholders together, to clearly articulate and make explicit the desired outcomes of learning in stage one of their framework. This comprehensive, research informed framework from Cole and Tibby (2013) draws on the earlier work of Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) , Kumar (2007), Yorke and Knight (2004), and has been shared extensively in the UK, Australia and more widely since 2013, going on to be applied in practice, up to and including at institutional level within two UK institutions.

Equally the ‘validated’ claim by Scott for his own work could be argued on the basis of employability being a widely misunderstood and elusive concept, (Cole and Hallett, 2019, Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Gazier, 1998, Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, Philpott, 1999, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a), so what is actually being validated? Whilst Scott (2016b) ‘validated’ his model with a large sample, a question could be asked of what was the point of reference for those individuals within this sample? What informed their thinking, judgement and assertions of what were the desirable qualities and competencies in graduates, and how did they then articulate them? In the same way that key employability literature is potentially absent from Scott’s thinking, could the same be argued in relation to the understanding demonstrated by participants in his sample too?

From an employment perspective, there is clearly a logic and rationale for seeking the views of employers; however, when each employer may want something slightly different, any responses that are ‘validated’ could be argued to only really be representative of the views and needs of the employers within that sample. Clearly Scott (2016b) engaged with a large sample, but this is not necessarily reflective of all employers.

The *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy offered here, differs conceptually from the *Professional Capability Framework* by Scott (2016b) in a number of other ways. It has already been outlined how the underpinning rationale for both models differs. The taxonomy offered in this thesis draws from secondary and primary research, and relates to the conceptual models of employability in the literature and the results of the national survey and case studies. Scott (2016b) has primarily validated his model by drawing on multiple sources, but critically, I would argue, not the relevant employability literature. The challenge raised here is, are the criteria defined within Scott’s model



the correct ones? In addition, is this same list of competencies and capabilities contained in his model appropriate for students studying across all disciplines? In practice, this one-size-fits-all approach can be problematic with an academic community, as I have discovered personally during the last eight years of my own career, in seeking to apply approaches to employability at scale across several institutions.

In addition, while the framework presented by Scott (2016b) appears to be relatively straightforward at a superficial level, with just five different sections (*Personal capabilities*, *Interpersonal capabilities*, *Cognitive capabilities*, *Role-specific competencies* and *Generic competencies*), these are then broken down into over forty individual elements. At a practice level, the complexity created here through the need to map the curriculum to forty different criteria, makes the framework far from straightforward, and if seeking to apply this at scale across an institution, resistance is highly likely. This assertion is supported by Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007), who stress the limited value of models which are too complex to be readily applied in practice. Any resistance is likely to then influence the overall effectiveness, consistency and impact of the approach. In order to counter this, the *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy highlights four distinct and broad areas of learning. The language adopted positions this supporting tool differently, too; it is less prescriptive than Scott's work, allowing greater flexibility for subject and discipline experts to define the individual qualities and dispositions desired under each of the four headings, rather than strictly limiting or stipulating what they should be. This is, in some ways, similar to the work of Tomlinson (2017), who uses more open and flexible elements in his *Graduate Capital* model, each of which can potentially be defined, shaped and applied in context and at practice level. This also aligns with the defining stage observed in the work of Cole and Tibby (2013), where key stakeholders are united in seeking to make explicit the desired and shared outcomes, or objectives of learning, across a number of different dimensions from the outset. This defining stage creates a sense of ownership and participant buy-in which is crucial for any future strategic level approach to employability to be effective.

The *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy is positioned as a set of flexible but guiding principles, rather than being defined and restrictive in terms of content. These

principles in turn advocate defining, mapping, implementation and review phases of activity, to guide how the process might best be embedded in practice. Conversely, Scott (2016b) defines the specific areas of learning desired, adopting constructive alignment principles (Biggs and Tang, 2011) to then guide the embedding of these desired outcomes. I would certainly concur with Scott's recommended approach in part, recognising the value of constructive alignment as a design principle to support more effective future approaches.

Fundamentally however, *Dimensions for Learning* draws more on the employability literature, placing emphasis on effectively guiding the combination of areas of learning that should be included from the outset in this constructive alignment exercise. It strives to ensure that the starting point is effectively positioned and focuses less on how to then take this forward and through to student assessment. To start this whole process on a solid footing, these foundations, in terms of what is to be achieved as a result of learning, is the most critical first step, if not gaps will continue to exist where specific areas of learning are simply not addressed.

The objective of Scott (2016b) is clearly linked to supporting graduate employment, as opposed to perhaps taking a longer-term view of preparing graduates for a career and life beyond the context of the workplace. In direct relation to the findings of this thesis, this overt focus on education for the purpose of securing a job can prove problematic. Academic engagement in places was seen to be negatively influenced by such positioning, with several individual academics cited disagreeing with the *employability agenda*, perceiving it to somehow be separate and disconnected from the core purpose of HE and its focus on learning and teaching. I would argue that *Dimensions for Learning* seeks to tackle this opposition and positions the approach to employability differently, as each of the dimensions for learning advocated holds value not only for the workplace, but also for many other aspects of life.

Combined, these findings provide both a direct response to the first research aim, to establish current understanding of employability at both a strategic and practice level, and to reflect on how these views then compare to the conceptual models of employability published in the literature. In addition, the findings provide the rationale for the second research aim, which was to develop a framework or structure designed

to support enhanced future approaches to employability. The *Dimensions for Learning* taxonomy is the outcome here, offered as a direct result of this work.

The challenges with employability are discussed in depth in the previous chapter. In summary, the most common understanding of employability captured from participants was particularly narrow in comparison to how employability is conceptually defined in the literature. Most often *skills* and *job* were the associated areas of focus, whereas the research defines employability in a much more nuanced and detailed way, highlighting the specific areas that link to and underpin each of its explicit and surface-level outcomes (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Kumar, 2007, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a). The Dimensions for Learning taxonomy presents a structure that may support achieving a greater level of understanding and much-needed clarity relating to the areas of contextual learning essential for employability and success in life. Critically, this taxonomy directly aligns with the conceptual models of employability in the research, an aspect missing from current practice, as captured throughout this study. This new framework for practice presents the means of achieving a more consistent approach at scale, providing a point of reference with an underpinning rationale. It is flexible and ultimately designed to support stakeholders at programme level in developing a shared language and subsequently a systematic approach to learning more holistically across the wider student journey (Barnett, 2011, Jackson, 2008 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

Supporting these assertions and moving this work to a perhaps more helpful paradigm, Harvey (2003), cited in Kumar (2007:22), describe employability as “a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher level learning”, supporting that this work might best be addressed as part of such a holistic learning approach rather than viewed as a separate and disconnected area of work, with Smith et al. (2018) and Tomlinson (2017a) also concurring with this need for a shift in the positioning of the employability agenda.

This shift may just be achieved when adopting a more critical view of the combined employability literature. Reviewing several of the conceptual models of employability published in the literature (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, Fugate et al., 2004, Knight and Yorke, 2004 and Tomlinson, 2017a), it is possible to identify that the constituent features of each of these models are all essentially outcomes of specific learning

experiences from across a wide range of contexts, spaces and environments and extending well beyond both *skills* and the responsibility of the formal curriculum alone (Barnett, 2011 and Jackson, 2008). This positions learning firmly in the spotlight as the common denominator, perhaps more accurately with *contextual learning* potentially acting here as the uniting force, which articulates much more accurately where stakeholders should be focusing their attention, and therefore the potential place and value of the Dimensions for Learning taxonomy is once more reinforced. Rather than *job* and *skills* continuing as the primary focus for employability, learning in a much broader, integrated and more holistic sense becomes the primary approach being advocated, and, crucially, one which may potentially have wider appeal to the academic community in the future.

This taxonomy elevates work to address employability, directing the focus towards several specified areas of contextual learning, each of which is critical to supporting students in their futures. Each of these directed dimensions for learning, as previously highlighted, aligns with the conceptual models of employability already published (and which has been demonstrated to be notably missing in practice), bringing that research-informed thinking to the forefront. The taxonomy reframes the overall discourse as being learning-focused, being articulated using a lexicon that is much richer and more nuanced than the blunt *skills* and *job*-dominated versions currently observed in both the findings here and much of the existing published research discussed in Chapter 2. Holmes (2011) describes the focus in terms of *identity* and this further highlights the need to focus on who we are as people, not only what we know and can do.

This new taxonomy presents a means by which a conceptual shift for employability might just be achieved. Reframing employability using the language associated with learning in a direct attempt to better engage all stakeholders would support the development of a shared understanding of the specific contextual areas of learning, crucial to underpinning more effective and research-informed future approaches to this area of work.

## Future research opportunities

The first opportunity is highlighted by Artess et al. (2017), who established that there is a lack of research on employability at a strategic level, and this is certainly an area that requires further attention. This is relevant to this research, as it considers the direct relationship between strategy and practice, the understanding and wishes of senior leaders, and how these were then interpreted in practice by academics with their students. Future research into this area presents an opportunity to consider the methodologies that would support more effective approaches to employability at scale, and beyond the more isolated examples of employability in practice in individual discipline areas. Future research which sought to evaluate the application of conceptual models of employability at both a strategic and practice levels would also certainly be of value, addressing one of the gaps identified in this thesis.

There is also an opportunity to identify what actually works for employability. This is relevant to this study, and is important, as with more effective methods of evaluation there would be real evidence to support the future enhancement of how this agenda is understood, interpreted and addressed at both a strategic and practice level. Without this evidence, seeking to influence understanding, the supporting discourse and subsequent practice relating to developing specific desired learning objectives directly connected with the conceptual models of employability will only continue to be elusive.

Thirdly, the research from Artess et al. (2017), highlights a body of research that uses the terms *employment* and *employability* interchangeably, and where there appears to be a lack of understanding of the inherent differences between these two terms. This was certainly supported through the findings of this study. Confusion overall within the sample is clear. It is therefore crucial that this distinction between these two terms is made in future, and that research is conducted into both areas, with more research needed into *employability* where the sole focus is not only on first destination related activities and results.

This same review of the literature over the last four years (Artess et al., 2017), also highlighted the significant focus on *skills*, which has been critiqued throughout this thesis. Again, more targeted research is certainly required beyond the notion of *skills*,

exploring further the links between attitude, behaviours and other qualities and dispositions that are also critical to support a graduate's future success.

At national level, there is also an opportunity to consider employability more holistically across the entire education journey. Clearly, students in HE are a product of their former experiences in earlier education. With such a strong focus on exams, grades and league tables evident in schools and colleges, there appears to be little room to focus on the attitude, behaviours and other qualities of children and young people. This was evident in the findings of the research, where students articulated a focus on gaining practical experience based on direct advice from their former teachers and tutors at school and college, yet with little mention of the specific value of this learning, the outcomes of these activities and the wider qualities and characteristics that are key here. Any research that is focused on employability in HE, should at least be mindful of the factors that have potentially impacted on a student's abilities before they enter the university environment.

There are several further future opportunities for research that could also build on the work conducted in this thesis. These include the following:

1. To conduct future national surveys with larger numbers of participants and to repeat the methodology here with a larger number of institutional case studies. The numbers in this thesis were strongly influenced by the logistics of working full-time and studying on a part-time basis.
2. To observe real-world practice. This thesis focused on understanding and interpretations of employability: what people believed the concept to mean and how they reported back that this was addressed in their practice. Direct observations of practice would provide a greater insight into whether it aligned with the activities that were described by participants and those which were outlined in the documentation that was reviewed.
3. More in depth documentary analysis could be conducted in future studies, with consideration given to a larger sample of documents and potentially quantitative analysis.

4. To replicate this research with other disciplines, establishing a more strategic view of any similarities and differences across subject areas. Ultimately this would help establish the reality behind those current anecdotal examples from sport, and determine how similar views and approaches to those articulated in the findings of this research, are generally evident across all discipline areas.

## Summary

As an academic, I have developed in a number of respects as a result of conducting this study. From starting this research as someone with simply a bachelor's degree and no real understanding of what it meant to be an *academic*, I lacked an identity and – on deeper reflection – lacked self-confidence as a result. Undertaking this thesis, and the literature review in particular, has been especially helpful to my transformation as an academic, and where this journey really began. As I became more well-read in this field of study, exploring a range of authors' views, definitions and models of employability, I was immediately able to apply my new knowledge in practice. This application directly informed my teaching with students; as well as the development of my thinking around this complex concept, and how it could best be interpreted and articulated at both a strategic level and in practice. I became more and more interested in the research-to-practice praxis, as my early experiences of working within an academic team in a sports department demonstrated to me that a research-informed view of employability simply did not exist. This subsequently evolved into a scenario where there was often a stark contrast between my personal views and those held by my colleagues and, in turn, our students.

My self-confidence and identity as an academic continued to grow and was particularly enhanced through my work in developing the framework for embedding employability for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) mentioned earlier. This work for the HEA, directly informed by my earlier work in this thesis, enabled me to present employability to others with a more robust academic grounding, not only internally to colleagues, but also externally at conferences and events, which swiftly led to the invitations to speak and share my views with others.

Speaking about employability on a regular basis has enabled me to informally socialise and test my thinking and emerging ideas resulting from the ten-year process of

undertaking this research and producing this thesis. Working as an academic and practitioner has also enabled me to test these ideas with the colleagues, programmes and modules that I was responsible for, and creating the perfect scenario for applying my thinking in practice, observing the results and continuing the process of learning in a cyclical manner.

Having now completed this thesis and spent many years testing ideas and speaking with peers and colleagues from institutions around the world, I am determined to write more. I am now interested in publishing several papers and, ideally, I would seek to position this work as one of relevance and importance to the pedagogical body of literature rather than being narrowly viewed as a piece on *employability*, read only by careers and employability practitioners.

In addition, I have a particular interest in scholarship, specifically in writing for open access sources to maximise reach and influence. While journals are highly credible within the academic community, they may actually be read by and potentially influence only very few people.

I am seeking to focus the rest of my career on being an academic who challenges current thinking, enhancing understanding and striving for better integration of learning and expertise across different fields of study which, at present, remain largely detached from the field of employability. My ambition is to explore the potential of becoming an Associate Professor in the short term, with responsibility for teaching and scholarship, rather than pure research. This would enable me to engage with the subject of employability in a slightly different capacity, potentially having an impact on strategy and practice at a national level and beyond through my future publications and speaking engagements.

My objectives for the future, informed by this research, will be centred around highlighting the importance of education, creating and valuing more diverse areas of learning for the future. Potentially then applying this across all levels of education over the longer term, encompassing both the lifelong and lifewide spectrums of learning that exist.



If the future workforce in the sports industry is to be better prepared for the challenges that they face on a day to day basis, employability as a conceptual area of work needs to ultimately be repositioned through a new discourse, one that better aligns with learning and teaching, and where the areas of learning that underpin employability conceptually are integrated within an institution's strategic and pedagogical approaches. This may help add a clarity to this agenda that is clearly and commonly missing, particularly, in terms of the specific desired learning outcomes and objectives. Making these explicit from the outset would provide a mutually understood direction of travel, and in this way uniting stakeholders in shared learning aspirations that align much more effectively with both the demands of the current environment and the employability research itself. Achieving this may then better support more effective engagement from a greater variety of stakeholders, shifting the responsibility from the Careers and Employability Services alone to becoming a shared responsibility of all those working in HE.

As has been highlighted, this repositioning might best be achieved by a deliberate and marked shift in the discourse to one where *skills, job and employment* are not viewed as the headline objectives alone, (Higdon, 2016). Instead, *contextual learning* becomes the focus, to support more diverse learning-related aspirations, and ultimately student identity in its widest sense, addressed as part of an integrated and holistic approach to learning, and grounded at programme level. Success would be measured, in part, by ensuring all that students are aware that the combination of learning across several dimensions is important to supporting their future success, not only in a work context, but also in life more broadly.

Dimensions for Learning (Cole, 2019) cited in Cole and Hallett (2019:128), was developed to serve as a tool and potential framework to engage with these challenges, shifting the discourse to one that centres around learning across four domains: *Subject Learning, Developmental Learning, Experiential Learning* and *Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Learning*. This alone will not create a single solution to the challenges that have been raised throughout this thesis, yet as a starting point at least, this taxonomy might act as a solid foundation from which a conceptual shift might be achieved, positioning the employability agenda more effectively in HE in the future.

Critically, the taxonomy presents a better opportunity to engage and unite all stakeholders as part of this process (Cole and Hallett, 2019 and Tomlinson, 2017a).

In summary, this thesis has captured several issues that have existed in the HE sector and employability arena for over a decade, illustrated by examples from those institutions that participated in the national survey and the two case studies that followed.

Taking these findings into account, and considering how these then related to the body of research in employability, has created the opportunity to make suggestions for how future practice in employability may be enhanced.

The closing assertion here is that through more effective future positioning of the employability agenda, stakeholder understanding and engagement may be developed, and that the Dimensions for Learning taxonomy presented here as a result of this study provides a means by which this could be achieved.

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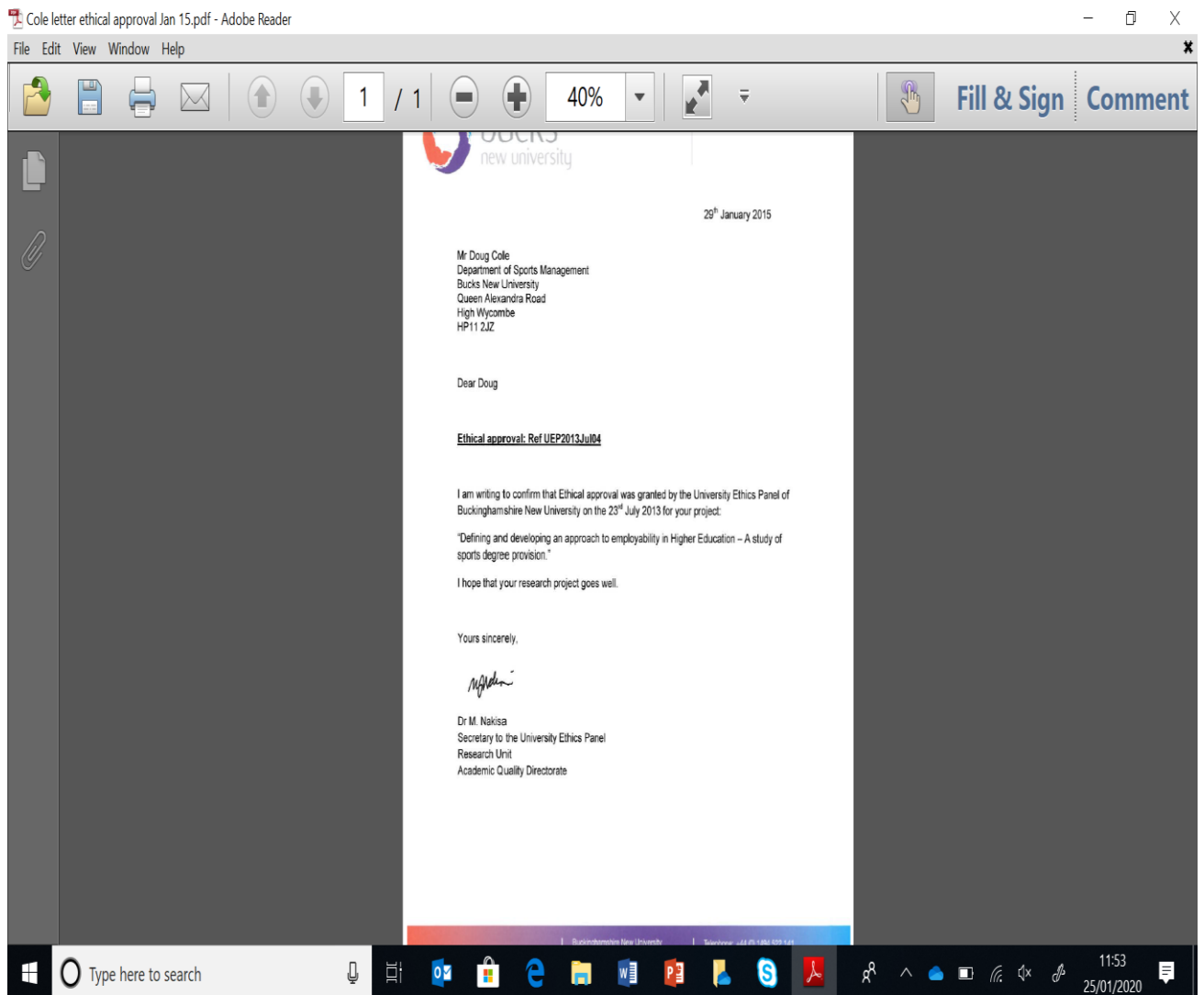
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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

Ethical approval for the national survey stage granted 23 July 2013.



## Appendix B

Ethical approval for the case study stage granted 2 March 2015.

The screenshot shows an Outlook window titled "FW: Evidence of ethics approval - Message (HTML)". The interface includes a ribbon with "File", "Message", and "Help" tabs. The "Message" tab is active, showing various actions like Ignore, Delete, Archive, Reply, Reply All, Forward, Meeting, IM, and More. There are also "Quick Steps" and "Move" sections. The email header shows it is from Mark Blythe <mark.blythe@northumbria.ac.uk> to Gill Drinkald <gill.drinkald@northumbria.ac.uk> with the subject "FW: Evidence of ethics approval". A note indicates the message was replied to on 24/01/2020 at 16:49. An attachment "PGR info and ethics app DC Feb 10 final v2.docx" (126 KB) is listed. The body of the email contains a message from Mark Blythe dated 23 January 2020, mentioning Doug Cole and Charlotte Bilby, and confirming the approval date of 02.03.15. A table follows, detailing the approval for Doug Cole, supervised by Peter Francis, for the project "Employability and Sports Science Degrees" at the University of Northumbria (code AMBER), submitted on 20/02/2015 and approved on 02/03/2015 by KJ, JH and SE. The email ends with "Best wishes" and "Gill". The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the date and time as 11:54 on 25/01/2020.

FW: Evidence of ethics approval - Message (HTML)

File Message Help Tell me what you want to do

Ignore Delete Archive Reply Reply All Forward Meeting IM More

Quick Steps Lifewide Team Email Reply & Delete To Manager Done Create New

Move Rules OneNote Actions

Mark Unread Categorize Follow Up

Translate Find Related Select

Read Aloud Zoom

MB Mark Blythe <mark.blythe@northumbria.ac.uk> Cole, Doug; Gill Drinkald

1 Fri 16:30

FW: Evidence of ethics approval

Flag for follow up.  
You replied to this message on 24/01/2020 16:49.

PGR info and ethics app DC Feb 10 final v2.docx  
126 KB

Hi Mark, I remember Doug! And amazingly enough, as the wonderful Charlotte Bilby was involved, I have found the actual submission form and can confirm the approval date of 02.03.15.

Name of student	Principal Supervisor	Title of project	University colour code	Date submitted	Reviewed by	Date approved
Doug Cole	Peter Francis	Employability and Sports Science Degrees	AMBER	20/02/2015	KJ, JH and SE	02/03/2015

Best wishes

Gill

From: Mark Blythe <mark.blythe@northumbria.ac.uk>  
Sent: 23 January 2020 15:31  
To: Gill Drinkald <gill.drinkald@northumbria.ac.uk>  
Subject: FW: Evidence of ethics approval

11:54  
25/01/2020

## Appendix C

### *Survey text*

My name is Doug Cole and I am a Senior Lecturer in Sports Management at Bucks New University and am currently studying for a PhD part-time. I would be very grateful if you could please spare some time to complete this questionnaire which is part of a national survey and which is the first stage of my research. This questionnaire should only take 20-30 minutes of your time, please feel free to use bullet points within your responses.

1. Approximately how many students attend your institution?

1000-5000   5001-10000   10001-15000   15001-20000   20001-25000   25001-30000  
30001+

2. Approximately how many students are enrolled in total on your undergraduate full-time sports degree programmes?

0-200   201-300   301-400   401-500   501-600   601-700   701-800   801+

3. Please indicate which group your institution would fall within:

Russell Group / Red brick universities / 1994 Group / Post-92 / Million + Group / Other

4. Please state the name of your institution (NOTE: the name of institutions will not be used in any of the data, or made public at any time. This is solely for the purpose of comparison within the sample and to enable potential case studies to be selected for stage two of the research)

Please rest assured all data will be dealt with confidentially and no individual or institution names will be used within the results.

5. Please indicate if your role is predominately involved with:

Teaching or Teaching and Management

6. Please specify the names of the sports programmes you are directly involved with:



7. Please define what employability means to you?
8. Please specify how employability is addressed at a policy level in your own institution?
9. Please specify how employability is addressed within the curriculum on your undergraduate sports programmes?
10. Within your undergraduate sports programmes curriculum is employability addressed: Explicitly / Implicitly / Don't know?
11. If employability is made explicit within the undergraduate sports programmes curriculum is this: Core / Optional / Don't know?
12. Is employability addressed within a stand-alone module on your undergraduate sports programmes curriculum? Yes / No / Don't know
13. Is employability embedded within a number of modules on your undergraduate sports programmes? Yes / No / Don't know
14. Is employability addressed in year 1 on your undergraduate sports programmes?  
Yes / No / Don't know
- If yes, please highlight how?
15. Is employability addressed in year 2 on your undergraduate sports programmes?  
Yes / No / Don't know/
- If yes, please highlight how?
16. Is employability addressed in year 3 on your undergraduate sports programmes?  
Yes / No / Don't know
- If yes, please highlight how?
17. Do you seek to assess employability on your undergraduate sports programmes?  
Yes / No / Don't know

If yes, please highlight how?

18. Please specify any other ways employability is currently addressed within your institution?

If you would be interested in your institution being considered as part of the case study stage of

this research please provide your name and contact details (Optional):

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Email:

\_\_\_\_\_

Many thanks for your time and co-operation.

## **Appendix D**

### *Focus groups and interview prompts*

#### *1. Academic Focus Group Guide*

Distribute research information sheets and collect signed consent forms.

Introductions, names modules taught

#### *Prompts*

P. What does employability mean to you?

P. How have you developed your current view of employability? Any literature informed this?

P. Who is responsible for employability?

P. What is your institutions view of employability?

P. How does the university approach employability? What does it do to address it at an institutional level?

P. What does employability mean in the context of this sports programme?

P. What do employers want to see in the graduates of your programme?

P. What does it take to build a successful career in the sports industry?

P. Do you work with your Careers and Employability service? If so how?

P. Do you think students understand the term employability? Do you explicitly explain the term employability? If so when and how?

P. How do you address employability in the programme?

P. Is employability assessed in your programme? If so how?

Thank you for your time and next steps

## *2. Student Focus Group Guide*

Distribute research information sheets and collect signed consent forms.

Introductions, names, year of study

### *Prompts*

P. Why did you choose to study this programme?

P. What do you hope to do for a job after you graduate?

P. What does employability mean to you?

P. How did you arrive at this view of employability?

P. How is employability explained to you on the programme? When and where?

P. Who is responsible for employability?

P. How is employability addressed on your programme? By who and when? Year 1?  
Year 2? Year 3?

Thank you for your time and next steps

## *Academic Interview Guide*

Distribute research information sheets and collect signed consent forms.

Introductions, names modules taught

### *Questions*

Q. What does employability mean to you?

Q. Please can you explain how you have developed this view?

Q. What does employability mean to your colleagues teaching on the same programme?

Q. What do you think of the word employability? Is there a better alternative?

Q. Is there one university approach to employability? How do other departments and programmes tackle employability?

Q. How does the university approach to employability impact on the department and programme?

Q. How does your department and programme team approach employability?

Q. What does employability look like in practice on this programme? Year 1? Year 2? Year 3?

Q. How do you measure the impact of your work in employability?

Thank you for your time and next step

### *Leader Interview Guide*

Q: Who is the lead for employability within the institution?

Q: What are the institutions main thematic priorities?

Q: What does employability mean to you?

Q: How does the institution approach employability?

Q: How do you resource support for employability and overall how does this rank against other key thematic areas?

Q: What challenges exist in relation to employability for the institution?

Q: How do you measure success in relation to employability?

Thank you for your time and next steps

## Appendix E

### *Transcript sample - Interview transcription*

File Name:	Academic interview A2
Duration:	31:56
Client Contact:	Doug Cole

**Interviewer** I'm here with Doctor XXXX from Institution A. Just for the record, could you perhaps outline what programmes and modules you're teaching at the moment?

**Respondent** Yes, I predominantly teach on Sports Development Coaching, a little bit of Sports Business Management, I'm a sports sociologist so I teach a Sports Sociology module mostly. So sports [inaudible 00:24] market which is an introduction to sports sociology leading into basic marketing functions module, Applied Sports Field Study which is an introductory level research [inaudible 00:34] module which is about getting students to do, so how to put together a questionnaire and go out and do it as opposed to the theory. And we do observation and interviews with them as well. Research Methods at second year I teach. I run the Research Dissertation module. What else? There must be more than that. I can't think of anything else.

**Interviewer** I'm sure there's more. We're going to talk about practical examples later. Just generally speaking, this interview, there's some questions at the beginning that are focused around you as an individual, your own personal thoughts. Then looking at a programme level section, then moving up to what's the institution doing? So just in terms of how you might want to frame your answers, you might want to consider that. Starting off with what does employability mean to you?

**Respondent** It's very close to my heart, as you know. I think employability for me is its readiness to hit the ground running when they finish university in their job. So readiness to hit the ground running and they are ready to go in any particular job. So it's more on the job skills and training which is why I'm cynical because I don't see that as the university's job.

**Interviewer** How have you arrived at that view? Where has that come from? Have you read any literature around this space or is it more from experience? How do you form that view?

**Respondent** Basically employability's been drip-fed over the last few years. You pick up little bits. I've never sat down and read much about it because it simply hasn't interested me enough to do that. So drip-fed bits of information, little internal conferences and things like that. Emails that come through, various different things. What I find interesting or more amusing about it is all the people who work with employability and preach employability are always so keen to point out that it's not about skills and it's not about on the job training and then when they try to describe what it is, they describe on the job skills and training. That's basically what they're talking about in some form or another. So I think people who work with employability including [inaudible 03:01] the employability guru of the world and yet I don't think you know what it is. I don't think anybody knows what it is.

**Interviewer** Okay. As part of this process, I'm not passing comment at this stage. We can possibly talk about that later. What do you think it means for your colleagues and your teaching then? Obviously, you've been very frank and candid, and you've shared what you think but just amongst others, it's a word that's hanging in the air there. It's important to institutions. But what about people you work with? How do you think they view it from your knowledge of those colleagues? Particularly on the same programme.

**Respondent** I think they broadly see it the same way as I do. I'm not suggesting at all that these things aren't important and we do embed them in the course but I also think we've always embedded these sorts of things into the courses anyway. It's not just because we've been told of this word employability and it must be done now. So, I think we've always had this view of – we run vocational courses, so some vocational training is of course hugely important. Job experience is hugely important. So they see employability as a notion, as a concept, as important. The same as I do. But I think they probably view it in the same way as me that it's become overblown and talked about far too much and people are now trying to get us to do something that we've always done and always known about and always been very aware of.

**Interviewer** You've made it quite clear your views on the word employability. Is there a better alternative, putting you on the spot?

**Respondent** I don't mind employability. I used to suggest that gradueness is a better word but I've come to see things slightly differently now. I think gradueness and employability are two different things, both of which need to be considered in parallel. So employability yes is more the vocational, the on the job skills and things like that. Gradueness is much more about the notion of civic responsibilities and social responsibilities, abilities to think critically and abilities to go into any job and be able to adapt and do what's needed because you're independent and you're critical and that sort of thing. So those two sort of work side by side. So yes, I used to think gradueness was a better word than employability. Now I see them as two separate things. Employability is fine but employability is everybody's duty. In fact, if anything, it's the individual's duty to make themselves employable whereas gradueness is actually the responsibility of the university as opposed to employability, I think.

**Interviewer** As a department and within the programme team that you work within, how do you as a team approach employability? How does that manifest itself in terms of planning and delivery? What's the approach there? How is it tackled?

**Respondent** I don't know if there is an overriding approach to it that we use in the department. I think as individuals we come together. So when we designed our sports development and coaching course, we knew that we had to embed certain things. As much for student experience as employability but we knew that was sort of an employability thing. So they have work experience placement as part of it, we bring in industry speakers, they go out to various organisation sites to look around and [inaudible 06:30]. We see all those as employability things that we will embed within the modules as much as we can. But I wouldn't say there's one approach to that. We just look at our individual modules and we decide what fits best within them and then within the course as well. So I guess we work in course teams to try and make it as well rounded a course as we possibly can which includes those elements of employability.



## Appendix F

### Evidence of the coding exercise - Student Focus Groups

The table below is taken from the Excel spreadsheet which was used to group and code responses from the student focus groups. There is one column per focus group, three for Institution A and three for Institution B. The figures are presented as a basic tally, with the total frequency recorded in the second column from the left.

Q2. What does Employability mean to you?								
Attractive to employers	2	1,					1	
Get a job	6		1, 1			1, 1		1
Knowledge, subject specific	4			1,1,1				1
Skills, subject specific, technical, employability	10	1,	1, 1, 1	1, 1			1, 1, 1	
Be employable	1	1,						
Life-long learning	1				1			
Personality	1			1				
Achievements	1	1,						
Personal traits	1	1,						
Doing more than just your degree (A1, Q3)	4	1, 1					1	1
Certifications (A1, Q3) Badges (B3)	2	1,						1
Making your different, gaining an edge (A1, Q3)	3	1,					1	1
Experience (A1, Q3) Placements (B1) internships (B1)	13	1,		1, 1, 1		1, 1, 1	1, 1, 1, 1, 1	1
Volunteering (B1)	2						1	1
Getting contacts (B1)	2					1,1		
Having options when you finish your degree (B1)	1						1	
Security (A3)	1			1				
Self belief	2			1				1
Being a decent person (B2) /Polite (B2)	2						1, 1	
Get along with people (B2)	1							1
Patience (B2)	1							1
The degree qualification	2							1, 1

This raw data was then coded a second time, using the seven categories specified in the next table to group responses together, and as a way of identifying trends and patterns across the sample. The same methodology was adopted with the other participant groups.

### Student Focus Groups Definitions

<b>Employment</b> 26, 27, 30, 37, 41, Job / attractive / employable / being different / gaining an edge / having options when you finish your degree /	<b>Learning</b> 28 Knowledge / Subject specific 31 Life-long learning 33 Achievements 36 Certifications / badges 47 The degree qualification	<b>Experience</b> 38 Experience / placements / internships 39 Volunteering 35 Doing more than just your degree	<b>Career</b> 40 Getting contacts 42 Security
Group frequency 13	Group frequency 10	Group frequency 19	Group frequency 3
<b>Skills</b> 29 Skills, subject specific, technical, employability	<b>Behaviours</b> 45 Get along with people 32 Personality 34 Personal traits 44 Being a decent person / polite	<b>Attitude</b> 43 Self belief 46 Patience	
Group frequency 10	Group frequency 5	Group frequency 3	

## **Appendix G**

### *Invitation letter and information for participants and consent form.*

Welcome to my survey focussing on employability and full-time undergraduate sports degree programmes.

My name is Doug Cole and I am a Senior Lecturer in Sports Management at Bucks New University and am currently studying for a PhD part-time.

I would be very grateful if you could please spare some time to complete this national survey being conducted with other institutions offering undergraduate sports programmes across the Higher Education sector. The survey is designed to capture current interpretations of employability and subsequent practice of how this area of work is currently addressed within full-time undergraduate single subject sports degree programmes (Single subject would not include any joint honours programmes e.g. with Geography, French etc.).

This questionnaire should only take 20-30 minutes of your time, please feel free to use shorter bullet points within your responses.

Please rest assured all data will be dealt with confidentially and no individual or institution names will be used. Data will be stored securely on a password protected computer.

The findings of this survey will be made available to all participants if they so desire and may be presented at an appropriate conference in the future.

Employability as an area of work is high on the agenda and with this research, I am aiming to produce something that will potentially be of benefit to all academics and those who set policy at a strategic level within Higher Education. I would therefore really appreciate your time in this respect.

If you have any issues with any of the questions or would like to discuss these further please contact me directly on the email below or if you prefer, please feel free to contact my supervisor Dr Fiona McCormack on [fiona.mccormack@bucks.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.mccormack@bucks.ac.uk)

Thank you very much for your interest in this survey, please note the deadline for completion is Friday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2013. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me directly on [doug.cole@bucks.ac.uk](mailto:doug.cole@bucks.ac.uk)

### *Staff Participant Information Sheet*

#### *Employability and undergraduate sports degree programmes*

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. Before you decide please take time to read the following information carefully as it explains why the research is taking place and what it would involve for you. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like more information. Please take your time to decide whether or not to take part.

This study is seeking to identify current interpretations of employability with staff and students involved in undergraduate sports degree programmes in Higher Education. The study will also seek to identify how employability is addressed in practice.

Your institution has been asked to invite staff representatives involved across a range of year groups and modules and specifically to include those staff with a designated remit for employability. Students have been invited as representatives from the same degree programme and from each level of study. A mixed gender group has been requested for all focus group sessions.

You have been invited to take part as you are either directly involved in an undergraduate sports degree programme as a member of staff, or you have a lead role in employability within your institution.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide. During the visit we will go through the information sheet, which we will also give to you. We will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, however the information collected from you up until this point may still be used.

If you chose to take part, you would be involved in either a 60 minute focus group or a 45 minute interview. Some people may be invited to participate in both.

Within both the focus groups and interviews we will be discussing employability, what this means for your programme and how this relates to your experiences within the institution.

### *Confidentiality*

- All information will be recorded using a Dictaphone with prior consent.
- All of the information gathered through the research once transcribed will be coded; this code will only be known to the researcher.
- A master list identifying participants to the research codes data will be held on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher.
- Hard paper/taped data will be stored in a locked cabinet, within a locked office, accessed only by the researcher.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer known only by the researcher.
- Only the supervising team will have access to the identifiable information gathered. This will only be for the purpose of supporting the researcher.
- All information gathered will be held securely for a period of three years after the completion of the PhD (for the purpose of potential future publications). At this time all information will be disposed of securely

Once the study is completed and all results anonymised, these will be shared with the respective participating institutions and individual participants. Prior to this participants will be sent copies of the transcribed activities to ensure they are a fair and accurate record of proceedings. Individuals and institutions will not be identified in any report/publication unless they have given their consent.

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me directly and I will do my best to answer your questions (07515431375) or [doug.cole@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:doug.cole@northumbria.ac.uk) .

If you are unhappy about any aspect of this research and wish to complain formally, you can do this through my supervisor Professor Peter Francis, Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) at Northumbria University [peter.francis@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:peter.francis@northumbria.ac.uk) .

Many thanks for your support.

Doug Cole

### *Student Participant Information Sheet*

#### *Employability and undergraduate sports degree programmes*

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. Before you decide please take time to read the following information carefully as it explains why the research is taking place and what it would involve for you. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like more information. Please take your time to decide whether or not to take part.

This study is seeking to identify current interpretations of employability with staff and students involved in undergraduate sports degree programmes in Higher Education. The study will also seek to identify how employability is addressed in practice.

Your institution has been asked to invite staff representatives involved across a range of year groups and modules and specifically to include those staff with a designated remit for employability. Students have been invited as representatives from the same degree programme and from each level of study. A mixed gender group has been requested for all focus group sessions.

You have been invited to take part as you are a student on an undergraduate sports degree programme.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide. During the visit we will go through the information sheet, which we will also give to you. We will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, however the information collected from you up until this point may still be used.

If you chose to take part, you would be involved in either a 60 minute focus group or a 45 minute interview. Some people may be invited to participate in both.

Within both the focus groups and interviews we will be discussing employability, what this means for your programme and how this relates to your experiences within the institution.

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- All of the information gathered through the research once transcribed will be coded; this code will only be known to the researcher.
- A master list identifying participants to the research codes data will be held on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher.
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- Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer known only by the researcher.
- Only the supervising team will have access to the identifiable information gathered. This will only be for the purpose of supporting the researcher.
- All information gathered will be held securely for a period of three years after the completion of the PhD (for the purpose of potential future publications). At this time all information will be disposed of securely

Once the study is completed and all results anonymised, these will be shared with the respective participating institutions and individual participants. Prior to this participants will be sent copies of the transcribed activities to ensure they are a fair and accurate record of proceedings. Individuals and institutions will not be identified in any report/publication unless they have given their consent.

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me directly and I will do my best to answer your questions (07515431375) or [doug.cole@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:doug.cole@northumbria.ac.uk) .

If you are unhappy about any aspect of this research and wish to complain formally, you can do this through my supervisor Professor Peter Francis, Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) at Northumbria University [peter.francis@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:peter.francis@northumbria.ac.uk) .

Many thanks for your support.

Doug Cole

### CONSENT FORM

**Project area:** Employability and undergraduate sports degree programmes

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:** Doug Cole, Head of Employability and Enterprise, Northumbria University, Room 106 Northumberland Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear

**Please Initial Box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

*Note for researchers:*  
*Include the following statements if appropriate, or delete from your consent form:*

4. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded ☐

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications ☐

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Name of Participant

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Date

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Signature

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Doug Cole

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Name of Researcher

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Date

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Signature